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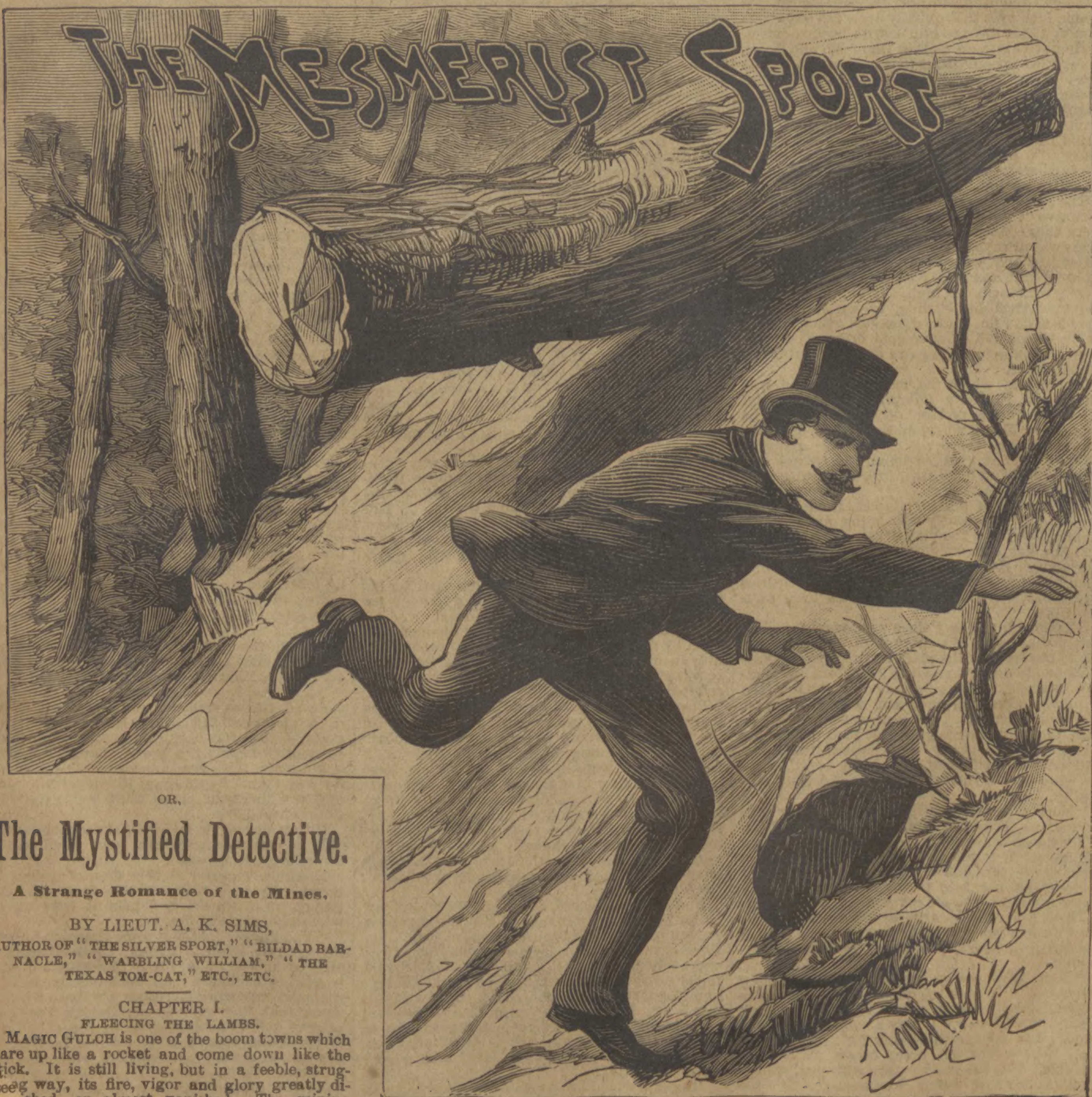
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OR,
The Mystified Detective.

A Strange Romance of the Mines.

BY LIEUT. A. K. SIMS,
AUTHOR OF "THE SILVER SPORT," "BILDAD BARNACLE," "WARBLING WILLIAM," "THE TEXAS TOM-CAT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

FLEECING THE LAMBS.

MAGIC GULCH is one of the boom towns which flare up like a rocket and come down like the sick. It is still living, but in a feeble, struggling way, its fire, vigor and glory greatly diminished, or almost vanished. The mining towns are full of such towns. Every new gold

NOTHING COULD BE DONE TO ASSIST THE IMPERILED DIAMOND SPORT.

fever brings them into existence by the score; and then, as the wave of excitement subsides, leaves them stranded wrecks.

The heyday of prosperity for Magic Gulch does not lie in the misty, historic past, however. On the contrary, its meteoric career is of but yesterday. It was a typical career, too. There was a glare and glitter about it, a flavor of tinsel and paint, and a flaunting of quickly-acquired wealth, that largely hid from sight the gross under-current of its life, where meanness, wickedness and crime all too plentifully abounded.

The trouble with Magic Gulch, and with all mining-camps of its kind, came from a lack of the moral and social balance-wheel given to older communities by the existence of family ties and the refining presence and influence of women and children.

Magic Gulch was not, however, better nor worse than its class. There were honorable men there; but the wild, lawless and vicious element predominated. Saloons and gambling halls ran wide open, day and night, and bore their legitimate fruits in various grades of ruffianism and crime.

Into this representative mining-camp there came, on a summer's day about two years ago, a young man of remarkable appearance. He was not especially handsome, though there was an attractive look in his open, intelligent countenance, and a gleam of friendliness in his frank, blue eyes that quickly drew friends about him and knit them to him as with hooks of steel.

He gave his name as Dan Donnelly, and it was quickly whispered about that he was one of the most expert gamblers who had yet struck the place. But, Dan Donnelly did not wear, as a cognomen. Scarcely a day passed after his arrival when it became transformed into Diamond Dan. By this and by the further explanatory title of the Gilt-Edged Sport, he became everywhere known, and his real name passed into swift oblivion.

The titles were peculiarly appropriate and descriptive of the man. His bearing and manner were those of the professional card-sharp. His dress was always of the neatest fit and the most becoming and expensive material. His shirt front, collars and cuffs were immaculate in their snowy whiteness. A high, silk hat of the latest shape adorned his curling, brown locks. But the blaze and fire of the diamonds which burned on his breast in a massive gold crescent, always drew to themselves the looks and admiration of all beholders.

The saloon which he most frequented was known as Fiddler's Palace. It was palatial after the garish fashion of such places. The proprietor, Mat Fiddler, understood his business; in consequence there was a dazzling array of mirrors and cut glass, brilliant chandeliers and reflectors, upholstered furniture and rather costly gaming-tables.

Diamond Dan seldom played, though often urged, but apparently spent the most of his time in observing the play of others, or in chatty and familiar conversation with the *habitués* of the place. He was free with his money, and such liberality will draw gambling parasites and admirers with more readiness than anything else.

Stepping into the Palace one evening, some two weeks after his arrival in the camp, he found the front of the place occupied by a three-card monte dealer known to local fame as Marcus Maximin. Maximin was one of the few men with whom the sport had not been able to get on familiar terms. They were not enemies. In fact, Dan had tried to gain the good will of the monte-dealer, but for some reason the latter had held himself aloof and could never be induced to pass beyond the bounds of formal cordiality.

"Here you are, gentlemen," the dealer was crying, as Diamond Dan entered the room. "The queen of hearts is the winning card! You will please to watch the lady closely. She is a retiring creature and not easily caught. But I will exhibit her face to you, so that you may know her when you see her again."

There were three cards in his hands, and he spread them out with their faces to the crowd, the queen of hearts placed conspicuously in the center.

"Now, here we go again," deftly shuffling the cards. "Watch the queen, gentlemen. The queen is the winning card. Of course, I shall trick you if I can. If you should win all the time, I'd be compelled to quit the business, you see. So, to-night, I'm going to win as often as possible. But the chances are with you, gentlemen, if only you watch close enough. It's the queen of hearts; don't forget that. The queen of hearts wins!"

The crowd in front of the monte man was much excited. Maximin's fingers were white and nervous, and moved with lightning-like rapidity; but a gleam of the winning card could be caught now and then as the fluttering pasteboards flew backward and forward beneath his nimble touch. Some, who believed themselves keen-eyed, also fancied they detected a mark by which the winning card could be distinguished. Through some accident, as it seemed, one corner of the card had become slightly bent.

"The queen, and the queen! You will have to have good vision, gentlemen, if you follow her movements. No lady of the ball-room ever tripped so swiftly. But, she is there, gentlemen; though I will go any man twenty that he can't pick her out. Fortune favors the brave! Who will go me twenty? You will never have a better chance to make a double eagle, in your lives. This is the time for men with sand. Remember, the queen is the winning card, gentlemen! Will anybody go me twenty?"

He placed the cards face downward on a little table. But there was the one with the corner slightly bent, and a miner, who had been watching it all the time, slapped down a gold piece, which the gambler as quickly covered.

"Ah, you are mistaken!" as the miner lifted the card, and found a ten-spot instead of the expected queen. "I told you I should deceive you. Your eyes will have to be quick if you win. And here we go again, gentlemen. The queen, and the queen!"

The next man was allowed to win; and this drew others on, until the monte man's gains must have mounted into the hundreds.

There was on the outskirts of the crowd a thin, dark-eyed, nervous individual, whose face shone eagerly as he watched the pile of heaped-up gold. He was pressing forward to wager a twenty on the elusive queen, when Diamond Dan stopped him by a tap on the shoulder.

The sport had nodded to the man as he entered, in the manner of a casual acquaintance.

"Don't risk your money there," he whispered. "It's a regular skin game. There is no chance to win, unless he chooses to let you. And he'll not do that to-night. There are too many suckers here ready to swallow his bait."

Cautiously as the words were spoken they reached the ears of Maximin, and he gave Diamond Dan such a look as the latter did not soon forget.

"This is my game, gentlemen. Nobody is forced to bet on it. You pick your card and take your chances. If you have keen eyes, you win; otherwise you lose. There is no hoodoo about it. It is simply a case of quick fingers against quick eyes. Who will go me another twenty?"

The nervous individual had reluctantly withdrawn on receiving Dan's warning advice, in obvious doubt, however, whether or not he was acting wisely. The sport had retired to his former position, where he leaned lightly against the bar, composedly smoking a cigar, and from whence he coolly watched the monte man's swindling operations.

"It's a low business," he muttered, under his breath, "and I'm half ashamed of myself for herding with such a lot of scoundrels."

Manifestly he had no regard for the men who lived by fleecing those who were ignorant or gullible enough to believe their softly spoken words. It was strange, too—this opinion, for he was accounted one of them.

For a full half-hour he stood thus, keenly observant of all that was occurring about him. In the rear of the room various games and "lay-outs" were running under high pressure; and, as the tables were crowded, the dealers were doubtless taking in stacks of money. The average miner loves his fling at cards, and those of Magic Gulch were no exception. Again and again they will return to the exciting and demoralizing play, frequently spending in one night's wild dissipation the hoarded gains which have been wrested by months of hard toil from the flinty hillsides.

No faro-dealer there, however, seemed to draw better than the monte man. But, there came a sudden break in his seeming streak of luck. Five times in succession one keen-eyed individual, who was evidently up to Maximin's tricks, placed his finger on the queen of hearts, and raked in the gambler's shining double-eagle. This was too much for Maximin's equanimity. Three-card monte was a very enjoyable thing to him as long as the gains rolled in his direction. But, when the tide turned—why, that was a very different matter!

Maximin would have refused to allow the man to play further, but that he had in the beginning boastingly declared there should be no limit to

the game. Anxious to stop his losses, he attempted to shift the queen after the man had plainly pointed out the card.

"No you don't!" the fellow cried, leaping forward with tiger-like quickness. "You can't come anything like that on me!"

He stretched out his hand to grasp the money. Maximin mistook the motion for an attempted blow, and shooting out his fist gave the man a stinging tap on the face. The miner was made of fighting metal and flew at the monte sharp like an enraged animal, endeavoring to draw a revolver as he did so. At this one of Maximin's "pigeons," named Mike Hogan, leaped upon the man and bore him struggling to the floor.

The greatest excitement instantly ensued. The miners had been pleased to discover that one of their number was up to "snuff," as they termed it; and they now rushed eagerly to his assistance. Shouts and calls flew fast and furious, weapons were drawn and a general melee seemed about to result. Hogan and the miner arose, clinched again, and stumbled fighting into the street.

They were quickly separated, however; but the struggle had enraged the mob, and the monte-dealer was forced to suspend business for the night.

CHAPTER II.

A PAIR OF SCHEMERS.

FOR an hour or more Maximin and Hogan loitered in the gaming-room, guardedly watching every one who came near them. Then, not caring to enter into the other games, they quietly withdrew, and ascended to their room on the second floor.

"Curses on that fellow!" Maximin growled, sinking into a seat and tugging furiously at a half-smoked cigar. "I almost wish you had knifed him. He's knocked us out of a cool hundred to-night."

"How did he do it?" Hogan questioned, with a puzzled air, referring to the remarkable certainty with which the miner had named the winning card. "He seemed to know just where the queen was every time."

"It was that infernal Diamond Dan, according to my notion. Didn't you notice that he was standing where he could see every movement of my hands? I think he must have been in league with the chap, and some way managed to signal him which was the queen, when I turned the cards upon the table. That's twice he's put his fingers into our pie to-night. Well, he wants to look out for himself, that's all! He pretends to be a professional, but I'm thinking a brother sharp wouldn't treat us that way."

"What did he do the first time?" Hogan queried, reflecting the shadow that rested on Maximin's face.

"Why, I should have snaked one or two twenties out of the pockets of Paul Carom, if he hadn't whispered the fool a warning. Perhaps it's all right, though. If there's any man in town that needs his money, Carom's the man."

Metaphorically speaking, Hogan had pricked up his ears at mention of the name of the nervous individual whom Diamond Dan had prevented from risking his money on the monte man's game.

"I seen the girl ag'in this morning," he ventured, looking askance at his superior. "She's a hummer, Max, and no mistake."

"Yes, she is good looking," the monte man asserted, tossing aside his smoked-out cigar and squaring himself in the large easy-chair. "But, pretty is as pretty does, you know. I'm not exactly after beauty this round, though it will no doubt make the game a deuced sight pleasanter for me. And, by the way, I've come onto more evidence going to prove what we've for some time believed."

Hogan licked his heavy lips after the fashion of a dog that anticipates a good feeding, and leaned eagerly forward.

Maximin laughed at this show of ardent interest. Then he took a letter from an inner pocket, unfolded it, and held it between his white and nervous fingers.

"You know I told you some time ago," glancing from the letter to Hogan, "that I'd accidentally stumbled on a bit of information that would pay us bigger than the monte business, if we could only work it. Well, I've been figuring along that line ever since, though I've kept mighty quiet, and said little to you about it."

"It seems that this Jeannette La Rue, or Jeannie, as the old man calls her, will come into a fortune of a handsome size, if the fellows who have the present handling of it can find her. She is supposed to be somewhere here in the mountains, but, as the said mountains are

good deal of territory, the finding of her is not so easy as it might appear.

"All this I got from the first letter sent by my old pard, Luke Jenkins, of New York. Luke's an old-timer, and as sharp as they make 'em. We got into a little scrape together, back there, a number of years ago, and Luke went to Sing Sing, while I took the advice of good old Horace Greeley and moved West. I thought it would be healthier for me out here, you understand!"

Hogan grinned as if the last sentence held for him a personal application.

"Luke is beating around in New York again, now, and while doing a little shadowing on his own account, found out that a search is being instituted for the heiress of certain millions. He got the young lady's supposed description, and a bushel of other valuable information, and then wrote me all about it.

"Well, I got his second letter yesterday," looking again at the paper, "and it proves to me we are on the right track. There isn't a doubt in my mind, now, that Jeannie La Rue is the wingless angel for whom a mansion and millions are waiting."

Hogan's eyes glinted with covetous desires as he looked at his companion and waited for him to go on.

"Do you reckon you can work the old man?" he asked, as Maximin stowed the letter again in his pocket and seemed about to subside.

"I should think you'd know I have mighty good reasons for believing I can," was the smiling and positive rejoinder. "Our little experiments a month or so ago ought to have convinced you on that score. Didn't I work him most beautifully, then?"

"But this new chap, Diamond Dan?"

"I'd thought of him," with a sudden glare of fierce vindictiveness. "And I've wondered if he'd be fool enough to stand in our way. But, pshaw! there can't be anything in that. I'll venture he hasn't more than a passing acquaintance with the old gent."

"No, I don't anticipate any trouble from that source. The trouble will come from the girl. Suppose, after we get the old man fixed, she should flare up and refuse to have anything to do with me? There, my boy, is where the breakers will lie, should there be any."

"Can't you string the cards so as to rescue her out of some trouble or other? Make yourself a hero, you know. Or else help them when they get into a tight pinch?"

"Win the old man's money, and then return it in the way of grub and knick-knacks? No, Hogan, that wouldn't do at all. I'm afraid you'd make mighty poor headway should you attempt to become a ladies' man. A girl's heart can't be won in that sort of style. The hero business might do; but the charity racket would turn out a flat failure."

"What about Luke Jenkins?" Hogan questioned, again licking his lips as if already tasting the sweets of the fortune they hoped to gain, while his greedy look showed that if once the fortune were in their possession he would be loth to divide his share of it with any one.

Maximin comprehended the nature of his companion's thoughts.

"'Twould be a pity to divvy with Luke, that's true. Maybe we could put him off with a few thousands; or we could just drop him, and never let him know what we'd done in the matter."

The monte man had evidently forgotten his strictures on the action of Diamond Dan, uttered but a few minutes before. There is an axiomatic "honor" supposed to exist among thieves, but neither Maximin nor Hogan were afflicted with it to any alarming degree. Luke Jenkins, a brother sharp, had given them the pointers they were endeavoring to follow; and even now, before they had fairly commenced the work his information had foreshadowed, they were prepared to hurl him overboard.

"I am almost in love with the girl from just thinking of that bit of money," Maximin averred, turning from Jenkins to thoughts of Jeannie La Rue's fortune. "I'll have to practice up, Hogan, in all those little arts of gentility which a fellow is so quick to forget in a place like this. I'll play the gallant adorer to perfection, I warrant you! I flatter myself I'm neither old nor ugly."

The monte man was quite right in this. He was not unhandsome. To many women he would have seemed the *beau ideal* of comely manhood.

"I'll marry the girl, of course," with an air of easy superiority. "Then I'll place myself in communication with the legal gentlemen, who are anxious to bestow this money on her, and see that she comes into her own. When I have managed to shift the fortune into my possession

—which you may believe I'll not be long in doing—I'll bid the gentle Jeannie adieu; and we'll fly to parts unknown."

From the intense manner in which Hogan looked at his friend it was plain to see that a thought of possible trickery on the part of the latter had flashed into his mind.

"Well, when you get your grip on the dust you don't want to play no Jenkins business on me. I wouldn't stand it."

He laughed hollowly to temper the threat, but Maximin could not escape the knowledge that he meant every word of it, and would hound him to the ends of the earth if a thing of the kind were tried.

CHAPTER III.

LA BELLE JEANNETTE.

"WHAT is it, father?"

Jeannette La Rue—La Belle Jeannette, her foster-father called her—arose from her seat by the window where she had been sewing, and hurried toward the bed at the further side of the room.

Paul Carom looked up with a smile that banished the spasm of pain which had swept across his face.

"Did I call? I was half asleep, I guess. But you may bring me a drink, Jeannie—that's a good girl!"

He watched her light figure as she hastened into the kitchen for the glass of water.

Paul Carom had had a bad fall in the mine that morning. A piece of rock at which he was prying had suddenly given way, precipitating him a distance of a dozen feet, and hurling him heavily on his back on the stony floor. His injuries were severe and painful; though the young doctor who had been called in gave the assurance that they were not of a serious character, and that Carom would be able to be out within a week or ten days. But the loss of that much time, just then, was a grave matter.

Notwithstanding the fact that Carom had been so eager to wager his money on the game of the monte man, the evening before, he was in poor circumstances. A drink of liquor with a comrade had been the impelling force on that occasion. It had not been sufficient to fully intoxicate, but had lifted his fancy into the deceptive clouds where poverty becomes wealth and empty pockets turn to bulging purses. The twenty dollars he would have staked on the chance of picking out the queen was the sole coin in his possession and almost the only thing that stood between him and want. And now there would be a doctor bill to pay, the living expenses would go on, and he could do nothing to meet them!

The groan which had caught the quick ear of Jeannette had been forced from Carom by a knowledge of this, as much as by the pain he was suffering.

He returned the glass to her with a sigh, after he had emptied it, and still followed her with his eyes as she resumed her seat at the window.

She was a handsome girl, Jeannette La Rue, though her beauty was of the modest, quiet type. A girl, one would say, who loved better to do good deeds in her own home, than to flaunt in silk attire and chase her youth away after the vanities of the world. An opportunity to taste the sweets of fashionable dissipation had never come to her, however, and to judge by present appearances never would.

A dark, sweet face, lighted by brown eyes, and surmounted by a coil of jetty hair. It was strong and resolute, too, and denoted French ancestry. Her French extraction was also indicated by the becoming simplicity and charm of her dress, its harmonizing and unobtrusive tastefulness, and the lady-like air which even its coarse materials conferred on her.

There was very little furniture in the apartment, but that little showed evidence of her deft handiwork, and was lighted by gay colored rugs, lambrequins and tidies. A rose bloomed against the window, and a half-opened bud plucked from it was pinned at the girl's throat.

All this Paul Carom noted with considerable pride as he lay so quietly against his pillow and allowed his gaze to wander from the girl at her sewing to the contents of the room. Quickly his memory sketched the scenes of the fleeting years since she first came into his life. He had no home, then; and it seemed strange to think so bright a flower had been given into the charge of one no better fitted to care for it.

It did him good just to see her walk about the room; so he called to her again:

"Will you shift that curtain, Jeannie, to keep the light from coming in so strong?"

Jeannie was nervous that day, made so by the shock of the accident. The fall had produced a

fainting-fit, she had been told, and she was in constant fear of its recurrence. The sound of his voice caused her to start; but she quickly recovered, and arranged the curtain according to his wish.

"Now, draw your chair up here; I'd like to talk to you a little."

She complied with alacrity, glad to see him so far rallied from the deathlike state in which he had been brought home.

"Oh, you will be well in a short time," encouragingly. "You have improved ever so much, already."

"Then you were frightened about me, eh?" a smile lighting up the thin, dark face.

"Well, you know you're not strong, father; and—and—yes, I was a little bit scared."

"I am all right, now! I can feel that."

He reached out his toil-worn fingers, which were so fleshless they resembled claws, and placed them upon her head.

"It's a good thing, likely, that I fell this morning. It has laid me up here and given me a chance to think. I haven't been traveling as straight a path lately as I should. But I intend to turn over a new leaf."

"Yes, I've been thinking, Jeannie—about you and me, and about the past and the future. Take it all around there's a good deal to think about in this life, if one will but stop and give himself a chance."

"I want to 'specially talk about Marc Maximin, however, more than about anything else. I was fool enough to want to take a fling at his monte, last night. Some way that sticks in my mind and keeps me thinking of the fellow. If there's a bad man in this camp it's Maximin!"

"Why, father!" and Jeannette's face showed her astonishment.

"I know what you mean," he went on. "I oughtn't to speak so about one who treated me so well when I was sick a couple of months ago! But I can't help it, Jeannie. He was kind then, that's true; and it seems almost like backbiting a friend to say anything. But I don't mean to talk about his gambling, and all that."

His manner bewildered her quite as much as his words. He was fairly trembling from sheer nervousness, and there was in his speech an intensity very uncommon.

"Yes, I must warn you to beware of Maximin," a shudder creeping over him as the name passed his lips. "Something, I can't tell what, impresses me with the feeling that he is no friend of ours. I can't recall that he has ever injured me, yet it seems to me he certainly has, at some time or other. It isn't a memory, but an impression, which I can't understand or shake off. Just the thought of him to-day is enough to bring a shadow over me."

"You're not as strong as you think you are," she said, soothingly. "That is all, I feel sure. It may be you are troubled with the vague recollection of some dream. I'd try to get some sleep, and think no more about it."

The perspiration was standing on his anguished face, and in his deeply-sunken eyes there was a shade as if some great and indefinable fear oppressed him.

"You fancy I am flighty," with an attempt at a laugh which sounded like hoarse mockery. "But my head was never clearer, and I was never more in earnest in my life. I'm as positive of the fact that Marc Maximin has injured me in the past and will try to do so again, as I am that I can't prove it or even name what he did. That sounds silly, don't it?"

It certainly did, though Jeannette did not care to state it so harshly.

"I think you have a touch of fever," she urged. "If you'll let yourself get some rest you will feel differently about a good many things by to-morrow."

"Not about this, Jeannie!" again smoothing her hair with his claw-like fingers. "I haven't a particle of fever. I wish I could explain to you just how I feel—tell it to you so that you could comprehend it. But I can't. It's so different from any other feeling I ever had that I can't find words to say just what I want to. But you'll promise me one thing, Jeannie?"

He looked at her so mournfully and earnestly that she could scarcely repress the starting tears.

"Of course I will, father. I have always tried to do as you wish."

"I know you have. You are a good girl—too good for such a wild camp as Magic Gulch. And that's why I fear for you; and why I want to put you on your guard against Marc Maximin. Promise me that you'll hold yourself aloof from him and from any one who comes in his name!"

So terrible was Carom's expression that she

bowed her head against his pillow and allowed the long-pent tears to flow, as she gave the promise he exacted.

CHAPTER IV.

ALMOST TRAPPED.

AFTER the fight between Mike Hogan and the pugnacious miner, who was resolved not to be cheated by the monte man, Diamond Dan kept Maximin and Hogan under close surveillance until the pair quitted the gaming apartment for the purpose of retiring to their own room.

He was actuated to this by a conversation had with a gambler named Dick Sloan.

"Our monte friends seem to be having a rocky time to-night," Sloan had observed, referring to the actions of the enraged mob. "These miners are half drunk; and if they should take it into their crazy heads to have a hanging bee it would go hard with Max and Hogan."

There was something in his tones which caused Dan to look at him observantly. Manifestly Sloan cared very little for the safety of his brother gamblers. Dan even suspected that he would be rather pleased than otherwise if the mob should develop bloodthirsty propensities and string the monte men to the nearest tree.

"Maximin was a fool for attempting to cheat the fellow in that open fashion. He should have known that if the miner had eyes keen enough to pick out the queen with such unerring certainty, he would also be able to detect anything like a change in the cards after they were once on the table."

The sport watched Sloan closely while giving expression to this terse criticism; so closely it seemed he was trying to read the gambler's inmost heart.

"Right you are!" Sloan assented. "It was the work of an idiot."

They were standing in a small indentation or alcove, far enough from the excited buzz to talk freely and in low tones, and where they were not likely to be seen or observed by eyes or ears friendly to Maximin and Hogan. Diamond Dan had had many quiet, gossiping chats with Sloan, and knew him to be a shrewd observer and an accurate judge of human nature; and likewise a man well posted concerning the lives and records of various members of the sporting colony then congregated at Magic Gulch.

"What do you know of them?" he queried, with the air of a man who has but a trivial and passing interest in the question propounded. "I've been told they haven't been here a great while."

"No; they've not been here long. But I met Max over at Golden Canyon a year or two ago. He was on a funny lay, then, too. A bigger swindle even than this three-card monte business, if there can be a bigger; and it paid almost as well, I should judge."

"Ah!"

Dan lifted his handsome eyebrows in an anticipatory way that served to tickle Sloan's bump of gossip and launch him headlong into the details of Maximin's career, so far as they were known to him.

"The first time I ever saw him was in the public hall at Golden Canyon, where he appeared as a mesmerist. He done some very wonderful things, too, though I fancy they must have been on the fake order. He put fellows to sleep, and then had them go through all sorts of queer antics at the word of command. I thought the chaps must be pals of his, at first; but I became acquainted with one of them afterward, and he told me on his honor that he did not know how it was done. In fact didn't know a bit more about it than I did."

"I never saw anything draw like those exhibitions. The camp about went wild over them, that's a fact. And the mesmerist part wasn't all there was to them. He gave us some imitations of this spiritualistic business; had rappings and all that sort of thing, you understand, and made tables move, etc. Some of it was really too wonderful to believe, almost; and I suppose I never should have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes."

"Seeing is believing, you know, and I couldn't go back on it; though I never can be convinced that it wasn't all trickery, especially that part relating to the spirits. He didn't claim it wasn't trickery, if I recollect aright; but he didn't explain, and a good many people thought he couldn't have done so, even if he wanted to."

This was a new phase of Maximin's character, and one of absorbing interest to Diamond Dan, and he covered Sloan with a multitude of questions concerning it.

"He staid there a month or so, until the thing began to grow a little bit stale and ceased to draw as it had at first; and then he disappeared,

and I never saw anything more of the fellow till he showed up here in the Gulch as a monte man, with Dick Hogan as his 'pigeon.'"

"And he's had a wonderful run of luck here, I understand?" Dan questioned.

"Yes; he's been stacking up the rocks pretty lively! One of the first things he did was to burst the faro-bank. That gave him money with which to pay Mat Fiddler for the privilege of running the monte business in here; and he's been flying high ever since."

This talk with Sloan seemed to excite Diamond Dan's curiosity in a strange way. He gave closer heed to the gamblers than he had ever done before; and grew uneasy the moment they left the room. He continued the conversation, however, for some minutes, though it was very evident his heart was not in it. He was pleased, therefore, when one of Sloan's cronies approached and gave him an excuse for withdrawing.

He had previously learned the location of Maximin's room. His own was on the same floor and just beyond that of the gambler's—there being two or three apartments between them, however.

When he had released himself from Sloan's companionship, he hurried quickly, but quietly, up-stairs. When the corridor had been gained he slipped his shoes from off his feet and stole forward with the noiselessness of a cat. The faint light of a lamp high up in the corridor's further end served to dimly illuminate the place and show the location of the door.

There was a subdued murmur of voices in the room of the monte man. In a crouching position Dan advanced along the corridor, and applied an ear to the crevice beneath the door, through which came the rays of a lamp.

The rascals were in the midst of their conversation concerning Jeannie La Rue and the fortune of which she was expected to come into possession. Diamond Dan's attention was immediately riveted, and he glued his ear still closer to the aperture, that no word might escape him.

"A very singular coincidence!" was his mental comment. "I don't think I ever ran across anything just like it. I reckon she can't be the girl I'm looking for? Pahaw, no! That's almost too silly to think about. I've seen this Jeannie La Rue and she don't fit the description worth a cent. It would be a go, now, if these fellows should carry out their scheme, and then discover, when it's too late, that they've blundered and got hold of the wrong girl."

Convinced that he could have no personal interest in the matter, he still listened, resolved to fully understand their plan. A desire to thwart them was rapidly growing up in his mind.

"It would be an outrage to let them go ahead with that!" and his pulses thrilled with indignation. "It looks as if it's none of my business, and according to my rule of attending to my own affairs, I ought to keep out of it. But I could never forgive myself for permitting such a crime. 'I'll have to drop Carom a warning word."

"I may be giving myself an unnecessary amount of uneasiness, though, for if I read Jeannie's character aright, she's not the girl to take kindly to a man like Marc Maximin. On the whole, unless they resort to force, I think she can be trusted to look out for herself. If they try that, they may count on having me afool of them, that's sure!"

"Well, when you get your grip on the dust, you don't want to play no Jenkins business on me. I wouldn't stand it!"

The words were uttered in Hogan's hoarse voice, and came clearly and distinctly to Dan, as he crouched in the corridor. They were followed by the hollow laugh by which Hogan meant to temper the harshness of the threat. The laugh ended suddenly, for Hogan, glancing up, noticed that his superior's face was white with an unspoken fear, and that he was staring hard at the door.

Diamond Dan had made an incautious movement, which had been caught by the monte man's quick ear.

Without waiting to reply to Hogan's menace, he took a hurried step forward, clicked the key around in the lock with nervous rapidity, threw the door open and looked into the corridor. There was a wicked glare in his eye, and his right hand swiftly fished a revolver from his coat-pocket.

But, brisk as were his movements, Diamond Dan had been equally nimble. The stairway was ten feet away. A few alert, but almost silent, bounds enabled him to gain this; and when the door was thrown open by the monte man, Dan had slipped into his shoes and seemed to be ascending from the floor below. It had re-

quired all his adroitness to do this. To escape down the stairway or into his room had been impossible.

His pulses were leaping, and there was a flush in his face, but feeling that a bold course was the only one now open, he stepped lightly into the corridor and advanced along it with all the carelessness he could assume.

Maximin was standing in the door, a black and suspicious look disfiguring his handsome features.

"Good-evening," said Dan, steadying his voice and assuming an air of jocular familiarity. "Been having some high play below. You missed it by leaving so soon."

Maximin scarcely knew what to say, but gulped down his passion, gave an unintelligible reply, and then stared hard at the sport as the latter coolly sauntered toward his own room.

"Phew!" and the sweat came out on Dan's forehead, as he closed the door and dropped heavily into a chair. "I feel as limp as a wet rag. I don't think I ever came so near to being caught in my life!"

CHAPTER V.

A VICIOUS ATTACK.

MARCUS MAXIMIN chuckled softly as he closed the gate opening upon the Carom residence, and stood in the cool evening air, in the narrow street. The abode of Paul Carom rested against a hillside not far from the mine in which he worked. The houses thinned out at that point, the few cottages seeming mere stragglers on the edges of the dusty highway.

The shadows of coming night were creeping up from the valleys, driving the flame and gold from the mountain tops. No light glowed within the residence which the gambler had just quitted. In spite of his chuckling he was somewhat uneasy, and looked up and down the street in a sort of fearful expectancy.

"If I can just get away without the girl seeing me!" he muttered. "Things have worked like a charm. I couldn't ask to have them better."

From which, and from his manner and actions, it was very apparent he had been paying a visit to Paul Carom, the man he had determined to "work."

"I've got him just where I want him, now. He was a little obdurate at first, and I thought I was going to have trouble. But he came under beautifully, as I knew he would. From this on, I ought to have easy sailing. The success or failure of the scheme now lies with the girl. If she is half as easy of management as the old man, I can marry her within a month; and if I don't miss my guess, it won't be two months more until I have my grip on the fortune."

With these pleasant cogitations, he pulled his hat over his eyes, and hurried up the street toward the heart of the town. He endeavored to keep well within the shadows of the rocks and buildings, however; and move as quietly as if he were but a shadow himself.

His features, dimly revealed now and then, would have presented a fine study for one versed in facial expression. If thoughts are ever revealed in one's countenance, surely Marc Maximin's were, at that moment. Such a look of craft as distorted his visage is not often seen. The curl of his lip was fiendish, and the contracted pupils of his eyes reflected diabolical visions. Hellish thoughts were stirring blackly in his mind.

"It's a great plan! A great plan!" rubbing the palms of his hands together. "I flatter myself it goes away ahead of anything that I ever tried. I can force Carom—"

The thought was never completed. A man leaped quickly from the dark depths of a hollow at the side of a path, and attacked him furiously. It was at the most deserted point of the long street. There was no house within a hundred yards, and no human being anywhere visible. A cry of surprise and sudden terror arose to the monte man's lips, only to be shut off by the heavy blow which bruised his face and tumbled him among the rocks in the hollow. Before he could rise, the unknown assailant sprang down and rushed upon him like an enraged animal.

Maximin was so bewildered by the unexpected assault, and so shaken up mentally and physically, that he was almost wholly unprepared to resist this second onslaught. Nevertheless, a long schooling in scenes of danger and excitement made him prompt to think and act. There was a heavy club or bludgeon in the man's hand, and with it he aimed a blow intended to brain the prostrate gambler. But Maximin slipped aside with the nimbleness of an eel, and the blow descended harmlessly on the rocks.

Up to this time the assailant had uttered

der word nor cry; but now, a smothered exclamation of anger broke from his lips, for the club, slipping from the granite point on which it had fallen with such a terrific force, almost dragged him from his feet. The mishap was adroitly seized by Maximin. He struggled to his feet before the other could recover his equilibrium, and attempted to draw the revolver which he always carried loosely in the right pocket of his coat.

In this, however, he was unsuccessful; and when the angry man came at him again, the effort brought about a well-nigh fatal result. The revolver caught in the lining of the pocket, and his attempts to extricate it gave the aggressor time to regain his legs and his head. He had lost his club; but he dashed forward, nevertheless, with all the fierce impetuosity of a mad bull.

Maximin was trembling in a way that ill fitted him to withstand this wild charge. He succeeded in parrying the hastily aimed blow, however; and then closed with his antagonist, before the latter could strike again. The struggle that ensued was silent, but terrible. With bodies writhing and straining, and limbs locked together, they rolled over and over, like huge serpents contending for the mastery.

For a time it seemed that neither gained any advantage over the other. But as they staggered to their feet, only to fall again, Maximin's arm came in contact with a stone with such stunning force that it fell disabled at his side.

The other perceived the slackening of the grasp and comprehended the character of the low cry that fell from the monte man.

"Curse you!" he grated as he tightened his fingers about the gambler's throat. "I've got you where I want you, and I'll do you up in mighty short meter!"

Maximin felt his senses reeling under the compression of the iron-like clutch which sent the blood in hot tides to his brain and shut the air from his lungs with as much certainty as if a screw-clamp had been set about his throat. Helpless as a child, the instinct of self-preservation was yet strong upon him, and with a bloody blur before his eyes and a cloud settling over his mind, he managed to send forth one wild cry for help before complete unconsciousness enveloped him.

The cry was answered by a shout, and a hurried patter of footsteps. Mike Hogan, grown tired of waiting for the laggard monte man, had left the curbstone where he had been seated, a couple of squares above the hollow, and was sauntering slowly down the street. His impatient growls at being compelled to tarry so long were cut short by Maximin's call for help.

The very faintness and unnaturalness of the sound convinced him that the monte man had fallen into deadly peril of some kind. So he gave that encouraging shout and bounded to the rescue, whipping out his revolver as he ran.

Maximin had sunk limply to the earth, all the life apparently choked out of him; and the would-be assassin was fumbling blindly for a knife with which to finish his murderous task. The echoing pavement so multiplied the sounds of Hogan's foot-falls that the fellow drew himself erect, a scared look coming into his face. Foul, odious assassination was a crime not readily condoned by the people of Magic Gulch, and he knew that if caught, scant mercy would be meted out to him.

He was loth to abandon a work so nearly completed, and which could be finished at a blow, and again felt for the elusive knife, which had slipped from his belt and evidently dropped to the ground. Manifestly his hatred of the monte man, from whatever cause it arose, was of a malignant and rancorous character.

Hogan was rapidly drawing near, shouting his encouragement at almost every bound.

"Curse the luck!" the man angrily ejaculated, searching once more for the knife. "Those fellows will be on top of me in another minute."

The gloom was so intense in the hollow, and had also so increased on the higher slope along which Hogan was racing, that his belief that a force was rushing toward him remained undisputed.

As for the monte man himself, all sense of life or peril was still in abeyance.

A cry of joy arose to the man's lips as his hands touched the cold handle of the knife. Hogan was dangerously near, now.

"Take that!" he cried, striking heavily at Maximin. Then he scrambled over the rocks and fled up the hollow as fast as his legs could carry him.

Hogan saw him, and fired two or three shots in rapid succession. But the fellow continued on; and Hogan leaped down the incline, excitedly calling his friend's name.

"Where are you, Max?" he bawled, stumbling about in the darkness and barking his shins against the rocky projections. "It's so cussed dark in here I can't see a thing!"

Just then he tripped and fell headlong across the apparently inanimate form.

"Heavens!" he ejaculated. "He's dead!"

Without more ado he struck a match and flared its feeble light into Maximin's face. A glance showed him that his fears were not true. The muscles of the monte man's face were twitching, and he was gasping with returning life. The light had revealed more, although it had flickered out in an instant. The handle of a knife seemed to protrude from the injured man's breast.

"Stabbed, by hookey!" and he reached forward and felt cautiously for the haft of the knife. "I'm much afraid the scamp has done him up."

A touch reassured him, however. The assailant, in his haste, had bent too far forward in dealing the blow, and the blade of the weapon had passed through the clothing over the breast and down between the side and arm, inflicting only a slight flesh wound.

At this point Maximin began to stir and endeavor to sit up, muttering incoherently.

"Oh, you're all right!" Hogan cried, assuringly, at the same time lifting the prostrate man into a comfortable position. "I declare, though, I'd have sworn you was done for, a minute ago. The cuss had it in for you, and he'd have wiped you out if I hadn't got here just when I did."

The words and tones recalled Maximin to a sense of his whereabouts.

"Ah! it's you, Hogan? I feel as if I had been run through a quartz mill. But I'll be all right in a moment. I'm giddy and sick from the choking I got."

"If you can walk we'd better be going," said Hogan. "I suppose you know the name of the fellow that done it?"

"No!" and the monte man staggered to his feet, with his friend's aid. "He struck me with a club, I think, and knocked me down here, before I knew he was near me."

"Well," and Hogan firmly compressed his lips. "It was dark, and I didn't get as good a look at him as I'd have liked; but from what I did see, I'm willing to bet high it was Diamond Dan!"

CHAPTER VI.

AN ASTOUNDING CONFESSION.

As stated, Jeannie had been away from home during Maximin's visit to the Carom residence. Several days had passed since Carom's unlucky fall in the mine, and, although still confined to his bed, he was rapidly improving. But, there was a chance, he feared, that his place might be taken by another, and so he had sent Jeannie to the residence of the superintendent to say that he would be able for duty in a few days, and that he hoped the place would be held for him. The superintendent lived in a smart cottage at the opposite side of the town. His office and the mine were near; but Carom had not thought it best to trouble him during business hours on his way home.

It was quite dark when Jeannie returned, worn out with the long walk over the uneven streets. It had been thoughtless in Carom to send her forth at such an hour, for after night-fall the place swarmed with villains of high and low degree. Jeannie knew full well the character of the men she saw at every corner; and although a sickening fear came upon her at times, she pursued her way deliberately and courageously, and reached home without insult or molestation.

Carom was sitting up in bed anxiously awaiting her coming. An unnatural light shone in his eyes and he was unusually nervous, his bird-like fingers shaking visibly as he pressed them against the white covering.

The girl was startled, thinking he had taken a turn for the worse, or had been intruded upon and alarmed.

"Has any one been here, father?" she asked, looking at him anxiously.

"No," he said, never faltering as he met her gaze.

"The superintendent said you needn't give yourself any uneasiness, for you can go to work at any time."

She communicated this in a cheery voice, hoping the good news would act as a tonic. But if Carom heard her he paid no heed.

"You need rest and sleep," she asserted, seating herself at the bedside. "Haven't you better take one of those powders the doctor left?"

He put out his hand in a deprecating way.

"I want to talk with you a little, Jeannie!"

His manner was altogether so *distract* that it puzzled her. One thing seemed certain, however. He had been distressed while she was absent. She accepted his statement that no one had been there. Therefore his present nervous tension must be due to thoughts or memories which had gathered unbidden.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" she queried, giving him her hand as she settled herself to hear what he had to say.

"I feel impelled to a confession," he went on, without answering her question. "Jeannie, my name is not Carom, but La Rue; and—I am your father!"

The confession was so astounding, so wholly unexpected, and so contrary to anything he had ever told her before, that her face became as white as marble as the blood rushed in upon her heart in a quick tide. In hopeless bewilderment she stared at him, wondering vaguely if she had heard aright. The knowledge brought with it such a world of tumultuous emotions, such a whirl of new ideas, that her senses were numbed and dazed.

"Oh, father!" she managed to gasp, using the title by which she had always addressed him.

"It's true!" he declared, nodding his head, while his burning glances seemed to search out her inmost heart. "You think it funny I never told you before?"

She could not reply—in fact, she scarcely heard the query. Her mind was striving to grasp the heights and depths of this wonderful revelation. She had always longed for the true, strong love of a real father, even while confessing that no ties of blood could increase the strength of her attachment for the man who had been to her both father and mother since the days of her earliest recollection. Yet a warmer glow came to her heart with the thought that Carom was her father in fact as well as in name.

It was driven out by a chill that seemed to freeze the currents of her very existence. Obviously the story was conjured up by a feverish imagination. The evidence of this, to her eyes, was visible in his flushed cheeks and excited manner.

"You doubt it!" he said, coldly drawing back.

"Oh, how can I believe, father?" throwing her arms about his neck. "It is so strange—so strange! Why did you never tell me before? Why did you leave me in ignorance of this all these years?"

"I had a good reason, Jeannette!" holding her from him, and looking at her in his new, strange way. "The best of reasons."

He stopped and hid his face in his hands, as if hesitating to go on.

"Years ago I killed a man in the heat of passion; I fled from the place, and have been trembling ever since, feeling that the day of punishment would surely come. It was then I decided to bring you up in ignorance of the fact that I am your father, so that when the evil day came it would not strike you with such crushing force."

"Lying here, thinking the matter over, I came to the sudden resolve that I would deceive you no longer. It was not justice to you to keep you in such ignorance."

Jeannette again had her arms around his neck, and was sobbing like a child.

Carom was very pale, but also very quiet and earnest.

"I have made a discovery lately," he said, going straight on with his narration. "And that is that we have no better friend here than Marc Maximin. He was befriending us even while we were misjudging him. I found that out from the talk of some of the men who were here this afternoon."

This also was a startling change of front; but coming so quickly on the heels of the other, its singularity was not so noticeable to Jeannette. As yet that filled her mind, almost to the exclusion of everything else.

"If it were not for his influence, I wouldn't be able to hold my position in the mine a single day. You know that in my weakened state I am barely capable of earning the wages I receive; and half the time I do not earn them. The superintendent knows that; but as Maximin is one of the heaviest stockholders, he keeps me, at his request."

Jeannette had been trained to strict dutifulness; and now that the first tumult of doubt was passing away, she gave a ready acceptance to Carom's statements. She recalled Maximin's kindness during her father's illness, some time before. It had been in a line with these developments; and her heart glowed with gratitude for the gambler against whom she had been so recently warned.

For a moment Carom hesitated, as if anxious how she would accept these strange communications.

"Most men are selfish, of course, and I am sorry to say Maximin is not an exception. He isn't doing this without hope of repayment. He loves you, Jeannie, and hopes to so win your favor that he may one day be encouraged to ask you to become his wife."

Jeannette drew herself up, flushed and startled.

"He is not worse than other men of the place," he declared, going right on, as if to cut short any objections. "Gambling is not one of the deadly sins in Magic Gulch; and that is his worst offense. The most prominent men of the camp habitually take their little fling at cards, and no one thinks the less of them for it."

The girl knew that this was true; and, while she could not but feel that gambling and drinking must be wrong, even her naturally fine sensibilities had been dulled by daily contact with these vices.

"You will receive Maximin well, for my sake?" he asked, but giving the question a tone of command.

A feeling of rebellion stirred in the girl's breast, but the unquestioning sense of obedience which had descended upon her from her French ancestors stilled the rising storm.

"If you wish it, father!" in tones that were calm and submissive, but with a crushing, inward pang.

"I do wish it, Jeannie!" and he laid his hand softly on her head. "I knew you would not disappoint me; and we must repay Maximin in some way."

CHAPTER VII.

A TRICK THAT FAILED.

HOGAN's statement, together with his own suspicious feelings regarding Diamond Dan, almost convinced the monte man that the latter was the one who had so mysteriously assaulted him.

He was in no condition to speculate on the subject, however, as Hogan assisted him to the pavement and toward Fiddler's Palace. His throat throbbed and ached from the choking, and the bruised and swollen place on his cheek caused his head to feel as big as a bushel. The flesh wound in the side, which Hogan had banded as well as he could, was also painful and troublesome.

It required quite a week to put Maximin in presentable condition, during which time he remained close in his room. The enforced imprisonment chafed him, for it kept him from visiting Jeannette and likewise stopped his large gains at three-card monte. Hogan was an excellent "pigeon," but his fingers were not sufficiently nimble to enable him to run the game.

But Maximin did not remain idle. He employed his hours of seclusion in perfecting his scheme to obtain the girl's fortune and in careful study of the acts and character of Diamond Dan.

Notwithstanding Hogan's declaration, and his own fears, he could not find actual proof strong enough to bolster the theory that Dan had been his assailant. So far as he could see there was absolutely no cause for enmity between them. And yet he felt almost sure that the sport had been listening at the door of his room on the occasion of the conversation between himself and Hogan concerning Jeannie La Rue. That was a circumstance which added mystery to the present muddled state of affairs.

Thus thinking, he resolved to put this last relief to the test. If Diamond Dan had eavesdropped once he would do it again, should chance lead him to think anything could be gained by it. Therefore, as soon as Maximin was again able to haunt the gaming-room, he constantly sought a suitable opportunity to apply the test.

One night, while standing near Diamond Dan and engaged in talk with Hogan, he let fall a remark intended to excite the sport's curiosity. It was a reference to Jeannie La Rue and her fortune, spoken in tones that were intentionally unguarded.

Soon after, he left the place with his pal, and ascended to the second floor.

The bait took, as the monte man had hoped and expected.

Diamond Dan had not been inactive all these days. As a friend, he had called on Carom, and had thus obtained a good look at the girl whose cause he had more than half-resolved to champion against the gamblers. Hence, Maximin's apparently careless words acted upon him as a magnet.

Within ten minutes from the time they left the room he followed them. Warned by his previous experience he passed to his own apartment, without any effort at concealment. Here he lighted a lamp, and leaving the door slightly ajar that he might the more readily pass out, he rustlingly took up a newspaper and settled himself in a chair as if to read it.

As he went by the gamblers' apartment he had observed that they had a light burning low and were engaged in subdued conversation.

On their part they had anxiously awaited his coming, having prepared a trap which they believed could not fail to catch him. Its very simplicity rendered it dangerously effective. All they had done was to scatter a few handfuls of flour on the corridor floor just in front of the door of their room.

All unaware of this, and not in the least suspecting that he was being made the victim of a preconcerted plot, Diamond Dan sat in his own apartment with the paper held loosely in his hand, and with ears strained to catch the faint sounds coming from Maximin's chamber.

After a little he allowed the paper to slide noiselessly to the floor, cautiously removed his shoes, and swung the door open wide enough to permit the easy passage of his body. Then he crept into the corridor.

In previously advancing along it he had unconsciously crowded near the further wall, and his shoes had thus escaped contact with the flour.

His movements were so silent and stealthy that he succeeded in gaining the gamblers' door without their knowledge, though they stopped their talk every little while to listen.

"I'm afraid he ain't going to come," he heard Hogan observe, in a growling undertone. "I reckon he couldn't have dropped onto our little game?"

The words caused Diamond Dan to suspect that all was not right. He had already detected the floury, slippery feeling of the floor, which was plainly observable through his stockings; and he had likewise wondered at it without a thought that it had reference to himself. Now he put out a hand, and discovered the true state of affairs, for his quick intuition immediately revealed to him the nature of the trap.

"Oh, he'll be along by and by, if we're not totally off in our guess," the monte man made answer; and then they again fell to talking of the games of the evening.

Shaking the flour dust from his hand as well as he could, Diamond Dan drew himself erect with the utmost care, and began a mental search for some way by which he could withdraw without revealing the fact that he had been there. It was evident at first glance that he could not efface the marks he had made in the flour; and should he beat a retreat along the corridor in that condition, a series of floury footprints would betray him.

One thing, at least, had been this night proven to his entire satisfaction, and that was that Maximin and Hogan strongly suspected him of being their enemy.

It was a position to incline one to nervousness. Should the gamblers hear him he could not hope to get out of the difficulty as easily as before; and to be found there in his stocking feet would so prove his guilt that no evasion or explanation could be possible.

"I think I'd better quit trying to shadow these fellows!" was the thought that swept grimly through his mind. "They must be lineal descendants of 'The Artful Dodger.'"

He lifted a foot, and with floury hand carefully removed the stocking from it. Then he stepped far out, and breathed freer when his bare foot touched the clean floor. Holding the other foot over the floured space, he removed the stocking from it in the same way. Having accomplished this, he wrapped his handkerchief about the hand and the stockings to keep any of the tell-tale dust from dropping to the floor, and then hurried as quickly as he could to his room.

He had scarcely gained it when he heard one of the men spring into the corridor. They had fancied they caught the sound of his footsteps.

"Bring the lamp!" came in excited tones from Hogan, who had glared pugilistically about and failed to see any one.

The light showed the imprints in the flour, but they looked in vain for any indications of the direction the spy had taken.

"Thundering queer, that is!" Maximin muttered; while Hogan without any orders from his superior, hurried to Dan's room and tapped on the door.

The sport met him, lamp in hand, and with no traces of flour on his person. He had had

ample time to wash and dry his hands, and slip on his shoes.

"Ah, it's you, Hogan?" with a smile that was sphinx-like and imperturbable.

"I thought I heard you call!" and Hogan looked the sport squarely in the eyes.

"Then your ears deceived you, for I have been as quiet as a mouse for the last half hour."

At this Hogan apologized and retreated, but he was not convinced; and he and Maximin spent half the night in cleaning up the muss in the corridor and in discussing the mysterious and exciting event.

CHAPTER VIII.

A MYSTERIOUS AFFAIR.

THEIR trick had not resulted to their satisfaction. Yet, they were more than ever satisfied that Diamond Dan was shadowing them, though for what purpose did not seem clear. The history of each was stained with so many dark deeds, any one of which would be sufficient, if proven, to place him behind prison bars.

"The guilty flee when no man pursueth," is an axiom as true to-day as when first uttered; and the tremblings and fears of Maximin and Hogan were but new proofs of its correctness.

"We'll have to watch for a chance to settle him," had been Maximin's conclusion of the long discussion of the night.

The next morning, chance seemed to throw in his way the opportunity sought for. He heard Diamond Dan questioning concerning the progress of work in the nearest mine, the one in which Carom had been employed; and caught the sport's statement that he intended to descend the shaft and satisfy his curiosity by taking a look around.

The mine was known as the Climax Lode, and was one of the newest that had been opened. Maximin had visited it a number of times, and felt tolerably familiar with the windings of its black passages. If there was one place more than another favorable to assassination, that place was the heart of Climax Lode. The galleries were gloomy and narrow, the roofs low and sodden, and the monotonous drip of water sounded everywhere. Owing to this latter peculiarity it was accounted one of the most dangerous mines of that mineral belt; and huge timbers were forever being set in position to brace the treacherous walls.

All through the forenoon the gambler watched Diamond Dan closely; and, when the latter set off alone for the mouth of the shaft, he followed as soon after as he dared, without attracting attention. When he gained the mine, he found that Diamond Dan had descended; and the car, on its next trip, carried him also into the black depths.

The galleries had not been sufficiently extended to make it likely that any one would get lost in exploring them. Hence, Diamond Dan was given a miner's lamp and told to look about the place as much as he wished.

"There are several passages of goodish length, and they sometimes bow and twist like all git-out; but all you've got to do is to foller 'em up and they'll fetch you into the big chamber at the further end, where the men are at work."

This was the information and instruction given to the sport by the miner who furnished him with the lamp.

Dan was guided wholly by curiosity in making this trip, and trudged slowly into the first gallery, flashing the light now and then on the dripping walls, or stopping to examine a remarkably brilliant bit of quartz.

He was dressed in a manner to make him almost unrecognizable to any but an intimate acquaintance. His polished silk hat, neatly fitting clothing, and low shoes had been discarded for a style of attire more becoming a miner. But his white shirt front was visible beneath the rough coat, and in its center the diamond crescent burned with unusual luster under the rays of the lamp.

The monte man managed to escape from the cage, at the bottom of the shaft, without attracting the attention of the man stationed there; and this he did by crawling out on hands and knees while the other was working at a car of ore which he was preparing to send to the surface.

Maximin felt that he needed no light, and certainly wished for none. A dancing point of flame, which he believed to be Dan's lantern, caught his eye, and he crept stealthily after it.

His object was to overtake and leap upon the unsuspecting man, at some place where no call for aid could avail, and by the suddenness and impetuosity of the assault, overwhelm and slay him. He believed Dan had tried the serve him

that way, and it would be a vengeful turning of the tables.

The nature of the mine and the character of the passages seemed especially adapted for the accomplishment of his evil ends. The splash and drip of the water would serve to cover any noise he might make, and the gloom would conceal his movements. But for the fear that the report of a pistol might bring discovery, he would have elected to shoot the sport rather than risk the chances of a personal combat.

The dancing point of light was drawing away from him, and he hastened after it, made nervous by the thought that the sport might reach the further chamber before he could overhaul him. Occasionally the light was concealed by a turn of the gallery, and then he splashed heedlessly on, moved by feverish excitement.

The light disappeared, finally. He was nearing the chamber at the opposite end, now. There were one or two narrow, side passages near the spot where the lamp seemed to have gone out. In one of these a miner was delving, the lantern at his side casting a flickering flame upon the rocks, as an occasional gust of air, from some unknown quarter swept over it.

Maximin went on some distance further; and then feeling that Dan must have stumbled into one of the side passages, he turned back to seek him.

Suddenly he heard a soft splashing in the water, and feeling sure Dan had regained the main gallery and was now cautiously feeling his way forward, the gambler crowded himself against the wall and prepared to spring upon him.

He held a knife in his hand, and his whole frame quivered with suppressed excitement.

With tiger-like bound he leaped out as the man came opposite. He was mistaken in his expectations of finding the latter unprepared. The assailed must have heard his movements as he prepared to attack, for the blow was parried, and another given with the fist that caused the sport to reel.

Furious with rage and hate, Maximin dashed at him again, dipping and writhing in an effort to strike with the knife. But the other closed with a rush, and then squeezed him in such a bear-like grasp that the knife was rendered useless.

Thus struggling they fell to the floor of the gallery and rolled over and over in the muddy pools that had collected from the dripping walls.

Maximin was fired with an insane animosity that wonderfully increased his strength and fighting capacity. But the other seemed built of iron and muscled with steel. Time and again they staggered to their feet only to go down as before. The pools were stirred into beds of slime with which their persons and clothing were plastered. The knife was dropped; and thus with only the weapons of nature they contended in that horrible place for the mastery.

The sounds of the combat had reached the ears of the miner, and, not knowing whether the fight was being waged by human beings or by animals, he had darted away to spread an alarm among the miners in the chamber.

The combatants had not heard this; but when the workmen came swarming toward them, with loud shouts, the waving lamps illuminating the passage, their attention was necessarily attracted.

With a furious curse the man tore himself away from Maximin, and giving him a last vicious blow fled backward along the gallery. The blow tumbled the gambler again into the mire, and before he could arise the excited crowd was upon him.

At their head was Diamond Dan!

Maximin stared in amazement, a low cry of fear and astonishment escaping him. Diamond Dan's clothing was unsoiled except by the drip of the water, the whiteness of his shirt front was unstained, and the crescented diamonds gleamed with all their former brilliancy. Nothing could be more certain than that the man he had attacked had not been the sport!

"Hello! what's up here?" and Dan advanced and flashed the rays of his lamp into Maximin's face, which was, however, so covered with mud and slime that it was unrecognizable.

The gambler had got upon his feet, and to judge by his attitude was more than half-inclined to break into a panicky flight.

"Skin me ef 'tain't Marc Maximin!" declared one of the miners, more keen-eyed than the rest. There was no escape, now, and the monte man endeavored to make the best of a bad situation.

"I am rather used up!" he confessed, attempting to laugh at his sorry plight. "I was coming along the gallery a little while ago when some fellow assaulted me, and we had a fight,

with the result you see. He ran when he heard you coming, and must be in the gallery between here and the shaft."

The statement created the most profound wonder, and a search was immediately instituted for the unknown assailant. Maximin assisted eagerly in this, extremely anxious to get at the root of the mystery. But the galleries, if not numerous, were dark and forbidding and filled with many crevices in which one might hide, and the man was not found.

CHAPTER IX.

WAS IT AN ACCIDENT?

THE affair was as puzzling to Diamond Dan as it was to Maximin. How came the monte man in the passage without a lantern? was the question that kept rising in his mind. Speaking to no one of his suspicions, he yet proceeded to investigate the matter in a quiet way.

After Maximin had been given an extra coat and had ascended to the surface, the sport approached the man who handled the ore cars at the bottom of the shaft. He had met him a few times at Fiddler's Palace, and presuming upon the acquaintance thus formed spoke of the mystery of the fight in the gallery. The man had heard the details from a fellow workman, and was nothing loth to discuss the subject.

"By the way, when did Max come down?" and the sport gave as careless a tone to the question as he could command.

"That's what I was jes' thinkin' about a little while ago. Haaged if I know. I recollect when you come down, well enough; but I don't have no remembrance of t'other feller. I reckon he must 'a' been in the mine before I went on this morning, though it don't seem like he'd keer to stay so long as that."

It was anything but likely, Dan thought, though he did not choose to put his opinion in words; and as he left the talkative miner the feeling grew upon him that the monte man had observed and followed him for purposes of assassination. No direct reasoning led to this belief, but it came as if by intuition, and was fostered by thoughts of what had occurred the previous night.

But the mystery of the strange assailant remained a mystery, refusing to be cleared away by any course of logic.

All desire for further exploration in the galleries had been dissipated; and Diamond Dan soon after went above, thinking the pure air and bright sunlight might clear the cobwebs from his brain.

Maximin had disappeared; nor did he see him again that day. He was in his usual place that evening, however, and seemed but little affected by his experience in the mine.

The sport avoided the gaming-tables that night, and spent his time in observing the movements of the monte men and their cronies. There were numbers of the latter, for the gamblers had a large following among the rougher elements of the place; and several times Dan fancied that averted glances were given him by these men as they passed.

But the days slipped away without anything occurring to justify his beliefs, until one fine morning when he took his way past the Carom residence toward the office of the mine superintendent.

The latter was reputed to be an honorable, upright man, and, as he had come there at the very inception of the boom, Dan hoped to extract some hints from him that might prove of service. He wanted to question him concerning Maximin and Hogan, and perhaps about Paul Carom and Jennie La Rue.

He had not liked the way affairs were going. In his own work he had accomplished nothing, and had heard that the monte man was paying visits to Carom's ward.

The air was cool and exhilarating, making simple existence enjoyable, and he strolled leisurely along, drinking in the beauty of the sky and the mountain scenery.

On a wooded slope above the path he was pursuing, a number of men were at work, engaged in slipping heavy logs down a chute. They were to be used as braces in the mine, where the extension of new galleries and the constant rotting effect of the water required a ceaseless supply of fresh material.

Two of the workmen were prying at a log with handspikes, endeavoring to push it toward the chute. Dan recognized them as men known to be especially friendly toward Maximin and Hogan. On a number of occasions when the monte business became slack, and Hogan seemed unable to infuse new life into it, they had come forward and rekindled the excitement by win-

ning largely, thus stimulating their fellow-workmen to new bets.

As the sport reached the foot of the slope, and while his attention was attracted in another direction, a sudden cry arose from the group of men on the hillside. Looking quickly up, Dan was horrified to see the huge log bounding down the incline straight toward him. In some way it had escaped from the men who were handling it.

The consciousness of his dreadful peril rooted him for a moment to the spot. Then, with an inarticulate cry, he turned and ran downward and sidewise along the base of the hill, vainly hoping to outstrip the log in its headlong descent. It was plainly impossible; but, what man can stand still and do nothing to avert impending death, even though he realizes that all effort must prove unavailing?

Like a missile hurled from some monster catapult, the log came on, rolling and bounding from obstruction to obstruction, and sweeping everything before it.

The cry of the men on the hillside had penetrated to the office and mill buildings at the mouth of the mine, and from these came the superintendent and employees, only to be transfixed by horror as they comprehended the cause of the alarm.

Nothing could be done to assist the imperiled Diamond Sport, and it seemed equally certain he could do nothing to aid himself.

Scarcely more than a minute was occupied by Diamond Dan in his flight, and by the log in its descent, though to the horrified crowd the time seemed an age.

Then the sport tripped and fell—and the log passed over his prostrate body!

With excited cries the throng hurried to the spot, expecting to find Dan's body crushed into an unrecognizable mass. Their surprise was, therefore, great, when they found him still alive and breathing feebly, though unconscious. By some happy fatality, he had fallen into a depression, and the cruel weight of the log had been warded off, but enough pressure had been exerted to bruise his left arm and shoulder badly, and the pain and shock had brought a state of insensibility.

Almost the first man to reach him was Paul Carom, who, when the log started on its murderous course, had been standing near the mouth of the shaft preparatory to descending.

"See! he is yet alive!" Carom declared, bending over the bruised and bleeding form. "Carry him right up to my house and send for the doctor."

There were scores of willing hands, for the men who delve in the mines at the daily risk of their lives are proverbially kind-hearted; and Dan was lifted and borne slowly toward the Carom residence.

The cries and shouts had aroused Jeannie, who was now standing in the door, looking anxiously toward the scene of excitement.

As the throng turned in the direction of the house, with their burden carried so quietly in their midst, a sickening fear swept over her, for at that distance she could not single her father out from among his associates.

With the bounding step of a frightened deer she crossed the threshold and passed through the gate. Carom saw the movement, and understanding its cause showed himself on the edge of the throng, so that Jeannie might recognize him and be reassured.

Still she came on, her fears for Carom's safety dissipated, but with her heart torn with pity for the unknown.

None seemed more oppressed by fear and grief, however, than the two men who had had the handling of the log, and from whose grasp it had escaped or been purposely hurled. They were undeniably agitated, and no one thought to question whether or not this agitation proceeded from proper motives.

At Carom's instruction, Jeannie rushed back, pale-lipped and wild-eyed, and hurriedly arranged a cot for the injured man. Some minutes before a messenger had sped away for the doctor; and, by the time the sport had been comfortably placed in the bed, the physician reached the house.

A hasty examination served to confirm the correctness of the superficial one made by the miners. No bones were broken, and the sport's head had entirely escaped contact with the log. But the bruises on the arm and shoulder were of a serious nature, and the man of medicine thought there might be internal injuries.

As soon as the wounds were properly dressed, he attempted to restore the unfortunate man to consciousness, and with such gratifying success that Dan was soon able to look about him and take some interest in the affairs of the world.

CHAPTER X.

THE BIRTH OF TRUE LOVE.

No invalid ever had a more attentive nurse than had Diamond Dan in the person of Jeannie LaRue. The opinion of the people of Magic Gulch that Jeannie was "a good girl" received daily confirmation. She was quiet, thoughtful, careful, and unwearied in her good offices. The return of consciousness was but temporary; and there were many hours in which Diamond Dan raved deliriously, for the most part fleeing from imaginary logs that forever chased him.

A detail of miners and sports sat with him nightly, and the doctor's calls were not infrequent. Yet Jeannie was much alone with the patient, for Carom felt forced to continue his work in the mine.

To Dan, whether conscious or delirious, she became his good angel, whose touch could charm away pain and whose voice could lull to repose. Strangely enough, he became restless and uneasy whenever she passed from his sight; and if she did not return in what he considered a reasonable time he was almost sure to fret himself into a fever.

As for Jeannie, tremulous and unbidden thoughts were stirring in her heart like fledgling birds; thoughts, too, which brought a strange commingling of pleasure and pain.

Hour after hour, when she supposed Dan sleeping, she had studied his face, drawn to it by an impulse that was irresistible. His low-spoken words, and even his complaints, became as music to her; and when he smiled or praised, the heavens were irradiated with that light which was never yet on sea or land.

Then, one fateful day, she awoke to the knowledge that, unsought, she had given her love to this man. She had not known what love was before. In compliance with her father's wishes she had been accepting the attentions of Maximin with the unquestioning obedience which was a part of her nature, and endeavoring to cheat herself into the belief that she liked him; but she could delude herself no longer. A thought of the monte man brought a sense of loathing.

If the workmen had let slip the log purposely in the belief that the destruction of Diamond Dan would advance Maximin's interests, they had made a most woeful blunder. The presence of the sport in the Carom residence seemed destined to imperil the plan that lay nearest the heart of their chief.

The monte man was too well versed in the ways of the world, however, to show a sign of the displeasure he must have felt. Daily he called at the cottage, and always made earnest inquiries concerning the welfare of the injured man. For some reason he never remained long. It may be he divined the changed feelings of the girl.

One day he advanced into Dan's room, seated himself at the bedside, and regarded the convalescent sport fixedly and with an oily smile. "Getting along all right, eh?" and he endeavored to throw a ring of cheeriness into the words.

"Yes," said Dan, returning the gaze and seeming half fascinated by it. "I couldn't do better. Doc thinks I can get out next week."

"Ah! that's encouraging. I'm truly glad to hear it."

There was a warmth in this that left no doubt of his earnestness, for the sport had already remained too long near Jeannie to suit his plans and wishes.

"How's everything going on at the Palace?" Dan queried, trying to shake off the strange sensations that oppressed him.

"Oh, all right!" and the monte man's tones were as soft as the notes of a cooing dove. "There are a good many inquiries about you every night; and the boys will be glad when you can get among them again."

"My friend Hogan, too, I suppose?" a spirit of grim humor taking possession of him.

"Hogan? Oh, yes, he's been quite anxious for your recovery."

The burning eyes he had fixed on Dan seemed to emit a greenish glare at this juncture.

The sport strove to be jocular, but his wit appeared to have deserted him and an unutterable sense of drowsiness weighed him down. With an effort he threw off the spell, and sat up in bed.

"What was that you said?" drawing his eyes away by a strong exercise of will power. "Oh, yes, Hogan! He's been thinking about me? Well, I'm sure I'm much obliged to him. Give him my thanks, please, and tell him I should never have thought it possible."

Maximin frowned and bit his lip to keep back the gust of passion that strove for expression.

"My dear Dan, I'm afraid you're inclined to be facetious. I don't think you give Hogan the credit that's justly due him."

The sport's manner showed he thought he understood Hogan's character fairly well. He did not reply to the stricture, however, and seemed averse to any extension of the interview.

Maximin started on a new tack and talked glibly for several minutes, not pleased with his failure to engage Dan's interest and attention. But a discourteous spell had evidently fallen on the latter, for he replied very infrequently and usually only in caustic monosyllables.

Baffled and disgusted, the monte man at length took his departure.

Hogan met him at the corner of the square just above the house.

"What luck?" was the "pigeon's" greeting.

"Just none at all!" and Maximin emphasized the statement with a bitter oath. "I couldn't 'work' the fellow worth a cent. He's too strong for me, some way."

Hogan's face lengthened in sympathy with the disappointment of his chief.

"That's bad! What was the trouble? Maybe it went against you to have the girl there. If you could just have tolled her off somewhere, now!"

"'Twasn't that!" and Maximin shook his head decidedly. "I couldn't get a grip on him somehow. I don't think the presence of the girl had anything to do with it. I thought I had him once, but he threw me off, and after that I couldn't do a thing."

"I don't reckon he could have had any idea of what you was up to?"

"Hardly! I've never given any public displays in that line in this town, you know. If I had, I might think there was something in your remark. If we were at Golden City it would be different."

"So it would!" Hogan admitted.

"No, I simply failed because his will power is too strong to succumb to my influence. I thought his physical weakness would help me, but it didn't."

And embittered by this failure to gain mesmerist control over the sport, the pair of villains took their way slowly and thoughtfully toward the congenial atmosphere of Fiddler's Palace.

CHAPTER XI.

HOPES AND FEARS.

At the departure of the monte man Diamond Dan breathed a sigh of relief. He had felt very much as the dove must feel in the presence of the serpent. And, now that Maximin was gone a sense of mingled fear and hate convulsed his mind.

"Max is a dangerous man!" he muttered, striving to analyze his sensations. "He'll be more than ever tempted to do me up when I leave here."

He looked at Jeannie, who had stepped into the room to refill the water pitcher. She blushed under his gaze—a blush that gave her the color of a freshly blown rose.

"I wonder if it's possible she can be the girl I'm looking for?" he questioned, when he was again alone. "It would be a big thing for her, but for me—"

He did not finish the sentence, but whistled softly and glanced aimlessly about the room.

The truth was that the elegant sport was falling desperately in love with the quiet, humble Jeannette La Rue.

As has been more than hinted he had come to that section searching for the heiress to a fortune. The circumstances of the case were rather peculiar. More than twenty years before, Sydney Markham, the youngest son of wealthy English parents, had married against the wishes of those parents, and been cast adrift for the offense.

With his young wife he had come to the United States. Here all trace of him was finally lost, although it was believed he had gone to the gold fields of the Rocky Mountains, where he and his wife had died. A daughter had been born to them, and this daughter was the object of Diamond Dan's search.

The death of certain members of the family in England left a liberal portion of the fortune to Sydney's heir or heirs; and so far as could be ascertained this daughter was his sole representative. It might be that even she was dead, though the contrary opinion was the one entertained.

Certain well-known legal lights of New York had been employed to look her up, and these gentlemen had placed the matter in the hands of Diamond Dan, or Dan Donnelly as he was known to them. Dan had been pushing the search energetically for a number of weeks, and

finally stumbled upon some clues that led him to Magic Gulch. But there the trail seemed to end. He could not find the girl, nor any trace of her.

The only thing that had ever led him to think Jeannie La Rue might be the heiress to the English fortune were the statements made by Maximin in his conversation with Hogan, detailed in an early chapter. But the descriptions of the girls failed to tally. Markham's daughter was English born, and would doubtless show trace of her English descent; while Jeannie La Rue was decidedly French.

It was a knotty problem. More than once the sport had asked himself if he and Maximin could be hunting for the same girl. If so, there was a mistake somewhere; and it must lie with the monte man, who had been given a wrong description. It could not be otherwise, for Dan's information came from the fountain head.

This conclusion was a most agreeable one for the convalescent. He was extremely anxious to find the heiress to the Markham millions, but grateful that she had not been found in the person of Jeannie La Rue. This was inconsistent with his professional pride, which had always accounted success the prime factor. But if Jeannie La Rue were the Markham heiress, then he could scarcely hope to win her for his own, and to attempt this he was already almost resolved on.

Should it once become certain that she was the girl he was hunting, he would be forced to tell her of her actual station in life, and to do that would be to close the doors of hope against himself. His only capital was a well-trained mind and a vigorous body; and that kind of capital the world counts for little when matched against the wealth that is represented by money.

It would be an ungentlemanly and even scoundrelly act, he told himself, to try to win the love of Jeannie La Rue, if convinced she was the girl he sought, and before acquainting her with the truth. That was what Maximin was doing, and he had been unable to find words strong enough to condemn the monte man's action.

Through the long days of his illness the love he now felt for Carom's ward had grown by almost imperceptible degrees until it was the master passion of his nature, absorbing everything else. He thought of her by day and dreamed of her by night; her smile brought sunshine, and a shadow on her face was sure to be reflected in his heart.

"No, if she is the girl, I must keep my mouth closed," he inwardly groaned. "What could I say to the men who sent me here should I do anything so perfidious? It would be a violation of the most sacred trust. They could never forgive me, and I could never forgive myself."

The perspiration was standing on his face, which was pale with anxiety and thought.

"Jeannie!" he said, calling her from the other room. "I don't want to seem impertinent, but I'd like to ask you a few questions, which you can answer or not as you think best."

She seated herself quietly, although it was plain she was discomposed and startled by his manner.

"I suppose I may claim we are fairly well acquainted by this time, and I am presuming on this acquaintance in what I am about to say. You must know I couldn't help thinking a good deal about you, and a very natural desire has sprung up to know more of you than I do."

The color came and went painfully in the girl's cheeks, for she knew he was studying her face; but she folded her hands demurely in her lap and made no reply.

"You have never told me anything about yourself," he continued, feeling his way very cautiously, and fearful lest he should say something to offend. "Would you mind doing so, now?"

"Why, there isn't anything to tell!" she said, looking up archly; "that is, nothing beyond the ordinary."

"It will be so much easier to tell, then," he urged.

Diamond Dan was forgetting the fine instincts which usually guided him. Had he checked his impetuous eagerness, and taken time for thought he would have realized that he was doing that which in another he would severely censure. He surely was not justified in pressing such inquiries without first having laid bare the secrets of his own life.

He never hesitated to use craft against craft, nor to employ all the arts and tricks at his command in his pursuit of criminals, but here was a case very different. The girl was young and inexperienced, and withal so pure and innocent,

that any resort to subterfuge seemed inexcusable.

"I had fancied father had told you something of our history," she faltered. "I have been told I was born in France. I never knew my mother. We came to this country when I was quite young; and it seems to me we have always lived in the mountains, and in a mining country."

"And your real father—what of him?" Dan questioned.

A spasm of pain momentarily distorted her fine features.

"Mr. Carom is my father," she said softly.

Had the roof fallen in, the sport could not have been more astonished.

"But the names!" he cried, bewildered beyond measure.

"It does seem puzzling," she confessed, a hot flush burning in her cheeks. "I had always called him father, you know; but until very recently I had no knowledge that he was my father. I supposed him to be merely my foster-father, or guardian."

Her distress was so great and manifest that Dan forbore further questioning, although an insane and relentless curiosity was driving him half-mad. All his ideas and theories had been suddenly dislocated and hopelessly jumbled.

One thought, however, rose above the others like a light-house above a seething sea: Jeannie La Rue could not be the Markham heiress; and he might, therefore, hope to win her for his wife.

CHAPTER XII.

A PUZZLING INTERVIEW.

To the anxious Jeannie, Carom's manner seemed to grow stranger day by day. Since confessing himself her father he had spoken on the subject but once, and then appeared to be laboring under an excitement similar to that manifested on that occasion. At all other times he had acted as if the confession were a subject to be forgotten, never venturing to speak of it, or even to acknowledge the changed relation in which they stood to each other.

Jeannie's natural timidity was increased by this. She longed to have him sit down by her side, or take her in his arms, and review the history of their past, and minutely discuss all its incidents. She wanted him to tell her of her mother, of whom she had but faint recollections.

It was not enough to know that he was her father, she wanted every day to be assured of it, and to receive those many little marks of regard to which a loving daughter is entitled. But Carom's attitude toward her was not different from what it always had been. He was kind and even affectionate; but this kindness and affection was not changed in its aspect; and she was hurt and disappointed.

Two or three times she had nerved herself to speak out her thoughts to him, but her courage had failed at the critical point, and he had gone his way and left her to wonder over his singular reticence.

There was another thing that distressed her. Carom seemed bewitched by the gamblers, Maximin and Hogan. More and more he came to abandon her of evenings, and to spend his time at the Palace, presumably in their company. She had thought little of this at first. But since the coming of Diamond Dan, Maximin had ceased to hold so high a place in her estimation. In spite of her desire to think well of him, she began to look on him with fear.

She could not reproach her father, however, for his present high regard for the monte man was justified by the latter's kindness in the past. But she did venture to remind him of the debilitated state of his health, and express an opinion that late hours were not beneficial.

He evaded a reply, and nothing came of her well-meant admonition.

One evening Carom left the house in a state of unusual tremor, and took his way to the gaming-rooms. He was met at the entrance by Hogan, who conducted him at once to Maximin's apartments.

The monte man was in his most affable mood, and after forcing a drink on his guest engaged him in a long conversation. Before its conclusion he was interrupted and summoned below.

Hogan was left in the room with Carom, who showed symptoms of anxiety and uneasiness as soon as Maximin left. But Hogan was in an abstracted way, caused by a quarrel with a brother gambler; and he paced heavily up and down the room, with his hands thrust deep into his pockets, and a black look on his face, and paid scant attention to his charge.

Finally he strode into the corridor, where he

walked gloomily about until high-keyed and excited exclamations floated to him from the gaming room, attracting him so irresistibly that he bounded down the stairway two steps at a time.

The little altercation which had produced the temporary hubbub was quickly over—and then Hogan remembered Carom, whom he had so thoughtlessly and indiscreetly abandoned.

Maximin recalled him, also, as he saw Hogan stand hesitatingly at the foot of the stairs.

"Where's Paul?" he questioned, with a rather sharp accent, as he hurried up to his pal.

"In the room," said Hogan, confidently.

But he was ill at ease, as was likewise Maximin, and together they ascended to the corridor with unseemly haste.

Their worst fears were soon confirmed. Carom had disappeared.

"Curse you!" cried Maximin, infuriated to desperation. "What made you leave him against orders?"

Hogan whitened, and faltered out a lame excuse.

"You've just spoiled everything!" fumed the chief. "Knocked the fat plum into the fire. Hogan, you're an idiot! A fool for want of sense!"

Hogan had cowered at first, but these words were stinging him to a dangerous pitch of anger.

It is to Carom, however, that the reader's attention should be directed; and leaving these worthies to fume and threat, and fight if they so desire, we will follow the movements of the man over whose escape they are quarreling.

As soon as Hogan had disappeared, he crept stealthily from the room, and hurried by a back way into the street. For some reason, Maximin had temporarily lost his hold on him; and Carom seemed anxious to put as great a distance as possible between himself and Fiddler's Palace.

It was already growing dark as he hastened homeward. In his mind there was an indefinable fear, and in his veins there burned a fever which the coolness of the night wind could not allay.

Jeannie was pleased at his early return, but alarmed at his altered appearance.

"Shall I make you a cup of strong tea?" she asked, solicitously hovering over him.

"No!" he said, with the petulant air of a man who wants to be let alone.

Jeannie retreated, heartsick, for she seldom met with such a repulse; and Carom covered his face with his hands and sat brooding in his chair.

After a time he looked up and regarded her fixedly.

"Jeannie!" he said, drawing a chair beside him and beckoning to her. "I'd like to have a quiet talk with you."

Bewildered by the changeableness of his actions, she yet came and sat at his side.

"Maximin has been here a number of times lately, and though he pretends to be a great friend of mine I know he came to see you."

This was a strange beginning from one who had requested her to accept Maximin's attentions.

"Yes, father," she replied, not knowing how to meet the statement.

"I am afraid he means us harm, Jeannie! I can't hardly tell why I think so, for he was kind to me in my sickness, you know; but all the same I feel that I ought to warn you against him. I am sure he is no friend of ours."

Jeannie was amazed beyond expression, and could only stare at the speaker in a helpless way.

"You think this strange, eh? Well, it is strange, but it's true."

"It's so different from what you said the other day, when you said you were my father, and—"

and—

She hesitated and stopped when she saw the look of hopeless confusion which had come into his face.

Then a swift and indescribable change seemed to sweep over his features, replacing the previous look as with a mask.

"Yes, I am your father," he confessed, in tones that were identical with those he had used in making the statement the first time.

An overmastering fear descended upon Jeannie; a fear which was fully justified by the singular circumstances of the interview. Was her father's mind becoming unbinged?

It was certainly a warrantable conclusion. To all appearance her unfortunate reference to his former declaration had thrown his weakened mind from its balance and sent it traveling in the circuit of its previous hallucinations.

This was more evident as he continued:

"Yes, I am your father; and we haven't a better friend in the world than Marc Maximin!"

The words were so nearly the same as those used in that other memorable interview that he seemed to be repeating them by rote.

"I don't know what we should do if it wasn't for him. I'm not strong enough for the work in the mine, and keep my place there solely through his influence, as he is one of the principal stockholders. We owe him a great deal, Jeannie; more than we can ever hope to repay. So, when he calls on you, you must treat him well."

"Oh, father!" she cried, twining her arms about his neck, while the tears streamed from her eyes. "You are not well; I know you're not well! You are not at all yourself, this evening. Won't you go to bed and try to get some sleep?"

"I'm all right," he declared, straightening up with an effort. "I never felt better. It's on my mind to tell you these things about Maximin, and I can't help it."

"He wants to make you his wife, Jeannie. That's the real reason for his kind treatment of us. And I know you will accept him, and that he'll make you a good husband. It's true he's a gambler, but so is nearly every man in Magic Gulch. They all gamble, and no one thinks any the less of them for it."

She felt she could endure the torture no longer. Her brain was on fire, and she must obtain relief in some way or go mad, herself.

"Do lie down, father!" she implored, piteously. "Please, please, do lie down! Oh, I don't know what I shall do!"

She had withdrawn her arms from about him, and he looked up inquiringly as she pathetically wrung her hands.

"Yes, I'll go," he said. "I'm tired and worn out!"

And forthwith he marched to his bedroom; while Jeannie dropped into a chair and surrendered herself to low moans and hysterical sobs. But, so wrought upon were her feelings that she could remain quiet nowhere; and when the first outburst had subsided, she wandered blindly into the yard and out to the gate, where she stood for a few minutes staring at the lights of the town, but with eyes that saw nothing.

CHAPTER XIII.

DIAMOND DAN'S THEORY.

SHE was startled by a light step on the flinty walk, and turned, to meet Diamond Dan, who had followed her from the house.

The sport had been convalescent for some days, and was now able to walk about, with prospects that another week would see him entirely recovered.

He had arrayed himself in his usual faultless manner, and as he advanced, the diamond crescent on his breast scintillated brilliantly in the moonlight.

"I had no desire to play eavesdropper, but I couldn't avoid hearing what was said awhile ago."

There was such a ring of earnest sincerity in his voice, and such a manifest desire to help her, that in spite of herself her tears began to flow afresh.

"If my presence distresses you, Miss La Rue—"

"It is not that!" and she put out a hand to bid him to stay.

The warm sympathy of love made Dan wish he might fold her to his heart and endeavor to comfort her in her affliction. So propitious was the occasion that he would probably have done so, and then and there confessed his affection, had not a vague fear that she was the heiress to the Markham fortune still clung to him.

"I ought to have been asleep, I know, as you doubtless supposed me, but unfortunately I am not as sleepy-headed as I was a week ago. I thought once of coming into the room where you were, and so letting you know I could not help hearing."

"I fear I am glad you did hear, Mr. Donnelly!" a low pathos in her voice. "Otherwise I could not have approached you on the subject, as I desired to do."

She was agitated and trembling; and Diamond Dan conducted her to a seat on a low bench at one side of the path.

"I am afraid father is losing his mind," glancing apprehensively toward the house as she gave the words utterance. "As you must have heard all that was said, I needn't give my reasons."

"There was something strange about it," he admitted. "But I can hardly base a judgment on what little information I gained to-night. I hardly think the trouble is insanity, though I can't conceal from you the fact that it may be."

"You spoke of him the other day as your father?"

The sport laid much stress on this query, as he half believed that a solution of the mystery surrounding this would give the key to all of Carom's eccentric actions.

"Yes, he only recently told me of that."

"Pardon me, Miss La Rue, for any seeming impertinence in my questions, and believe me I have only the interests of yourself and your father at heart. But it seems to me there must be something back of what you told me. Why should your father keep this thing concealed from you so long?"

Jeannie sat for some time silent and thoughtful before replying.

"It's a secret, and I'm not sure I'm doing right in revealing it. If I only knew how much confidence to place in his statements! If his mind is really turning there is no way of separating truth from error. No way of assuring myself he is my father! And this secret, as I call it, may be only a fancy, and have no foundation in fact."

"I do not insist on your violating any confidence," he hastened to assure her.

"I think I understand you, Mr. Donnelly, and thank you for your kindness and consideration."

Then in a few brief, low-spoken words she disclosed the terrible revelation of manslaughter which Carom had made.

Diamond Dan listened with the deepest interest, and before she concluded a credible theory had begun to form in his mind.

"That lets in a good deal of light," he said, "and I think I begin to see through the mystery. Mr. Carom has all along acted queerly, though I can't convince myself that he is at all insane. His actions, it seems to me, are those of a man powerfully influenced by another. Few things, Miss La Rue, will drive a man like fear."

"From all the circumstances I am led to conclude that your father—we will take it for granted that he is your father—committed this crime years ago, as he says he did. In some manner Maximin has gained a knowledge of it, and is now threatening him with exposure."

"As you can easily see, this will explain a good many things that are now rather dark. It seems to prove that when your father came home this evening he had fully resolved to be true to himself and you, and defy Maximin to do his worst. But his resolution broke down, even while he was trying to set himself right, and he repeated his latest assertions."

The sport was so taken with the plausibility of his theory that he had plunged eagerly on, raising his voice sometimes more than was consistent with safety.

Jeannie, torn and distracted by apprehension, had yet given him the closest attention.

"Then you think he is not my father?" a sob half choking her utterance.

He had forgotten that in working out his conclusions he might be destroying a belief which she had fondly cherished.

"Either that, or his mind is, as you fear, becoming unhinged. I must admit that the whole affair is very much muddled."

"Oh, I don't want to think that what you say is true. Surely father—Mr. Carom—would not deliberately deceive me at the order, or even from fear, of Mr. Maximin. I should almost prefer to think he is losing his mind—though nothing could be more terrible than that!"

The sport regretted now that he had not tried to allay her alarm and kept his opinions to himself.

"I am sorry," he said. "It is distressing any way you look at it. I may be wholly wrong, and therefore trust you will not put too much confidence in my judgment."

But he was, nevertheless, thoroughly convinced that he had guessed aright.

For some minutes longer he talked, using his best efforts to subdue the nervous excitement under which Jeannie was laboring; and then they returned to the house.

To their astonishment they found Paul Carom gone.

CHAPTER XIV.

A WARNING NOTE.

WHILE Diamond Dan and Jeannie La Rue were thus engaged in conversation, a pair of snaky eyes were closely regarding them from beneath the shadow of a small tree near the fence, and keen ears were eagerly drinking in every word.

The owner of the eyes and ears was none other than Mike Hogan.

The ill temper engendered between him and Maximin had not led to blows. The rascals

could not afford to quarrel with each other, and when a few stinging epithets had passed, their returning sense told them so. Carom was gone; they had both been negligent; and realizing it, they quit calling each other hard names and set about trying to discover a way to undo the mischief.

As a result, Hogan was dispatched after Carom, in the hope that he might be able to intercept him before he could reach home. But Carom had traveled rapidly, and Hogan's swiftest pace was not equal to this task.

He gained the vicinity of the house while Carom was talking to Jeannie; and was prying about in the endeavor to overhear what was said, when Jeannie emerged and passed out toward the gate. Hogan withdrew somewhat precipitately, and in a nervous flurry, for he had narrowly escaped detection. He could not regain the street, and so crouched in the shadow of the tree in the expectation that she would soon retrace her way.

He was glad he had not succeeded in beating a further retreat, when Diamond Dan came out and led the girl to a seat at the side of the path.

"I'm much afraid the devil's to pay!" he muttered, as he crawled over the fence after the speakers had returned to the house. "We'll have to murder that Carom, yet!"

With which pleasant reflection he hurried with all speed back to Fiddler's Palace.

He found Maximin in the gaming-room, engaged in play; but succeeded in attracting his attention and giving him to understand that matters had gone woefully wrong.

The monte man had waited for Hogan until patience ceased to be a virtue, and had then engaged in a game of cards as a temporary abstraction. Being in no mood for play, he had lost heavily; and was white and furious as he followed Hogan up-stairs.

"You couldn't catch the fool, eh?" as he thrust a key into the lock of the door.

"No!" and the tones were blunt, for Hogan was not pleased with his chief's manner.

Then he added in a quieter tone, as they entered the room:

"I'm afraid he's give us dead away. It looks as if we were idiots for ever monkeying with the fellow."

This was not reassuring; but it was quite as much so as was the story which Hogan proceeded to hastily tell.

"Curse that Diamond Dan, anyhow!" Maximin exclaimed, as the unpleasant narration closed. "He's always crossing our path. It's dollars to cents that he's working against us all the time. The proof of it grows stronger every day."

Maximin felt at that moment that he had cause to hate Diamond Dan with all his heart. And not only to hate, but to fear him. The sport seemed destined to thwart him at every turn. Apparently he was trying to step between him and Jeannie La Rue's fortune; and now he was interfering in those schemes against Carom, whatever they were.

The first was decidedly the most bitter. At the outset the fortune had been the one thing Maximin cared for. But the beauty of the girl had so won on him that he had lost his heart to her before he was aware of it. And it was now maddening torture to think he might lose her altogether.

Not a word of this had he ever spoken to Hogan. In all conversations touching their plans he affected to think of nothing but the money to be gained. It would have been humiliating to acknowledge that the girl's loveliness had over-reached his duplicity and cunning, and that he had become the snared instead of the snarer. No, he could not tell that! The secret was not of a kind to be confined to even his dear friend, Hogan, especially when it was very likely that the said friend would greet the avowal with shouts of derisive laughter.

This fear of Diamond Dan had grown on the gamblers from the very first; and Hogan expressed a thought that had been frequently on the mind of each, when he said:

"Ain't there any way in which we can lay the fellow out? He'll be the ruin of us, if we don't!"

"Name it!" said Maximin, looking up with an unpleasantly suggestive smile. "I've racked my brain on that point for a week at a stretch. If we cared to do anything desperate, there might be a show. But, my dear fellow, we can't run our necks into a halter!"

"Hire some bruiser to do him up!" advised the brutal Hogan.

"And in case he got nipped have him squeal on us! 'Twouldn't do at all. We can't rely on any one but ourselves; that's the truth, Hogan,

and we must face it. I wish we could. But we ought to be able, both of us, to down our friend of the diamonds, and do it in a way to blind suspicion. I thought I would be able to, once, but I failed, as I have good reason to remember."

The topic was not a cheerful one, and the monte man gulped down some fiery liquor to steady his nerves.

"Shouldn't mind having a smell of that, myself!" and Hogan longingly eyed the empty glass.

"I'll get you some," Maximin replied, feeling that the other must be as shaky as himself.

This particular brand of liquor was kept locked in a drawer to which only the monte man had access; and to this drawer he went to obtain the bottle.

Hogan, who had been following his movements with longing eyes, at this moment caught sight of a folded bit of paper on the floor.

"Hello! what's that?" he cried. "Looks like some one's shoved a letter under the door while we were away."

He arose to pick it up, when a pistol-shot startled him half out of his wits and made him forget all about it.

Maximin, who had pulled open the drawer containing the liquor, reeled backward, white as a sheet, and with the exclamation:

"My God! I'm killed!"

The pistol-shot had come from the drawer, from which a cloud of gunpowder smoke was now issuing.

The front panel of the drawer was splintered, showing that through it the deadly missile had sped.

Hogan sprung quickly to the assistance of his friend, and as he held him from falling, poured out a stream of excited questions.

"Where are you hurt, Max?" he queried, as he carried him bodily to a lounge.

The monte man was beginning to regain his scattered wits.

"I don't know," he said. "The bullet must have passed through me, for I was standing right in front of the thing."

Hogan was kneeling at his side, making a hurried search for the supposed wound.

"Why, you're not hurt at all!" rising and giving a short, hard laugh. "Leastways, I can't find anything. You're just scared, I guess!"

The statement wrought a wonderful change in Maximin. He sat up with sudden alacrity, and after satisfying himself that he was not in the least injured, broke into a fit of hysterical laughter.

The ball had passed dangerously near his body, cutting ragged rents through his clothing, but it had not even touched the skin.

"There it is!" and Hogan pointed to a splintered hole in the opposite wall. "It come about as near getting me as it did you. How in thunder did it happen, anyway? I didn't know you kept a pistol in there."

"No more, I don't, old fellow!" and Maximin essayed a smile. "It's the attempt of some one to wipe me out."

Hogan gave a low whistle and approached the desk, but very cautiously, as if he feared the pistol-shot might be repeated. Maximin felt almost too weak to move, and impatiently awaited the result of the investigation.

"A regular infernal machine!" Hogan growled, as he craned his neck and took a wary look.

"I guess it's done its worst. Come and see it!"

Maximin dragged himself up and tottered to his friend's side. Looking down into the desk they saw only a revolver, with a piece of wire attached to the trigger in such a way that when the drawer was pulled open the trigger would be drawn and the weapon exploded. The weapon pointed outward, and it seemed scarcely possible that one standing in front of the drawer could escape being hit by the bullet. Maximin had approached the desk from one side, and had inclined his body forward in unlocking it. This alone had saved him.

Seeing that the revolver was now entirely harmless the monte man took it out and ran over it critically. It was of 44 caliber, and of the ordinary "bull-dog" pattern—a most dangerous tool at short range. It had held but one cartridge. There was nothing about the weapon to give any hint of whose it was. Hundreds just like it could be seen in show-cases in the town.

"I'd give a good deal to know who put that there!" and Maximin looked again at the drawer. "It wasn't there a half hour ago, for I opened the drawer about that time and it was empty. The scoundrel must have had a key, too, that just fitted the lock in the door, as well as one for this. How he managed to duplicate

mine gets me. It must be some fellow who has had access to the room.

There was on Maximin's face a look of annoyance and alarm.

"The trouble is, if he got in here once he can do it again; and as this trick has failed he'll likely try another one."

"Nice things to give a chap pleasant dreams!" was Hogan's grim observation. "A fellow will sleep well if he fancies that the bed may take a notion to turn itself into a cannon before morning, and shoot him through the roof. I'll be 'most afraid to sit down in a chair, after this!"

His face was so rueful that the monte man was forced to smile.

"Tisn't a laughing matter," he apologized. "But you did look too blue, then, for anything! Your face was as long as that of the head mourner in a 'way-up funeral."

Hogan was about to attempt some facetious reply, when his eyes again lighted on the folded bit of paper he had observed just before the spring revolver created such a panic.

He picked it up and looked it over curiously, an exclamation breaking from him as he glanced at the contents.

"This knocks the pistol business!"

"What is it?" and Maximin reached out a hand for the paper.

"Read it! It's some sort of a warning. No name to it, either."

Maximin clutched the paper feverishly, and read, in a subdued voice:

"MR. MARC MAXIMIN:—

"You will remember the tussle you had in the mine, when some chap jumped onto you, and then run when the miners came. I was down there then, and know all about it. You'll remember that we couldn't find the fellow and finally give it up as a bad job. Well, I run onto him that evening. He had been hiding in one of the galleries, and waiting till dark so he could get out without being seen. He was as muddy as you was, only the mud had dried on him and he looked like a fright. He tried to scoot past me, but I made out like I had a revolver and told him to just stop, for I knowed him; and he did."

"I won't give you his name; but you know him as well as you know anybody. I've seen you with him quite frequently of late, and you appeared to be on good terms. He tried to explain how he come there, but I told him he might as well give it straight, for I knowed all about it, and had been with the gang that had been hunting him; and I asked him what in the world he jumped onto you for. But he wouldn't say; he just begged me to let him out of the mine, and keep still about it. I told him I would, for he was so scared I felt sorry for him. He shook like a leaf; and I believe if I hadn't promised he'd have jumped on me like a wild-cat. And so I got him out of the mine without anybody seeing him; and I'd have kept still if it hadn't been for this evening."

"I come along the hall here and saw a man in your room. I knowed at once there was something wrong, for he was creeping about as still as a mouse. I draw back a little so as to listen, and heard him whispering something about fixing you. I couldn't make out just what. I think he was trying to steal something, for I seen him go to your desk; though I can't tell if he got anything or not. Then he slipped out and down stairs, after he had locked the door, and I saw who he was. It was the fellow that jumped on you in the mine."

"I've scribbled this in a hurry, hoping you'll get it, and that it may be of benefit."

"From

"AN UNKNOWN FRIEND."

There was the pallor of fear in the face of each as Maximin finished the reading, and they glanced toward the door and window as if expecting to catch sight of their unwelcome visitor.

"Who do you reckon it can be?" Hogan questioned hoarsely.

"I don't know!" declared the monte man. And then added:

"Do you know, Hogan, that I'm convinced Diamond Dan has an ally, as we've more than half-thought! While we're watching Dan, he's watching us, and manages to nip our little plans in the bud just when they're going nicely."

"Yes, the infernal scoundrel! And that says," pointing to the letter, "that he's a friend of yours. I'd like to choke his black heart out!"

Hogan's fear had given way to fury.

"No use fuming," Maximin advised. "Better sit down and let's see if we can't get at the bottom of this. We haven't so many friends, or pretended friends, but we ought to be able to count them very easily."

Together they ran over the list of their intimate acquaintances, dwelling carefully on the peculiarities of each, and weighing the chances for and against the proposition that he was the guilty man. But they could settle upon no one. Most of their intimates belonged to the sporting fraternity.

"It don't seem like it can be any of them!" Hogan observed decidedly. "We've had little

gambling quarrels, now and then, with most all of them, but nothing to cause them to have it in for us that way."

"There's one we haven't thought of," and Maximin looked long and thoughtfully at his friend. "It can't possibly be that it's Paul Carom!"

CHAPTER XV.

VIVIAN, THE GOLD SHARK.

THE talk had by Diamond Dan with Jeannie La Rue decided him to set about the task of elucidating the mystery of the hold which Maximin had on Carom. It was so difficult an undertaking that he allowed himself much time to think it over and map a plan of action.

Within the week he managed to walk down town, and of course paid a visit to Fiddler's Palace. The time was night, and on his return he stepped into a clothing store and purchased some articles which he deemed necessary for the new role he intended to play. Then, after satisfying himself that no one was following or spying on him, he went on to the Carom residence, where he still retained his room.

An hour later, in the disguise of a well-to-do speculator and money-lender, he again betook himself to the Palace, and in a short time succeeded in entering upon tolerably familiar terms with the *habitués* of the resort.

His disguise was most elaborate and complete. There was an entire change of attire. The glittering crescent had been replaced by a modest gold stud, and silken, gray side-whiskers, held in place by clear, pebble glasses, gave a benevolent aspect to his features. He introduced himself as Mr. Jules Vivian, of the city of Denver.

It was soon evident that the benignant Mr. Vivian liked a turn at cards quite as well as some younger men, and he correspondingly rose in the estimation of the gambling brotherhood. Hogan generously took the pilgrim from Denver under the protecting shadow of his wing, and with Maximin's assistance plucked him to a limited extent.

But in very many things Mr. Vivian was "up to snuff," as Hogan elegantly phrased it, and the plucking process was sometimes reversed; all of which steadily raised Mr. Vivian to higher and yet higher planes.

Between the somewhat scrappy conversation, the sedate and elderly gentleman managed to insinuate certain small bits of information about himself, all of them going to show that he had a good deal more money than he knew what to do with, and that, on gilt-edged security and at a high rate, he would be happy to accommodate his new friends, should they at any time chance to be in sore need of funds.

It was a piece of intelligence very gratifying to the monte men, who, in spite of the fact that their gains were always large, could scarcely rake together enough cash each week to pay the high tax imposed on them by Mat Fiddler. They were typical gamblers in this, spending their money as fast or faster than they obtained it.

"I'm not such a fool, gentlemen, as to carry any more of my money with me than necessity demands," the benevolent Mr. Vivian observed, shrewdly guessing the thoughts of robbery or worse that were stirring in the minds of these genial companions. "Nobody but an idiot ever carries his cash with him; but a bank check, with the name of Mr. Jules Vivian scratched in the proper corner, will, I assure you, haul some handsome sums out of some Denver bank which I could name."

There was a certain grandiose self-assertion about the boast that might have impressed finer sensibilities unfavorably. But the gamblers swallowed the bait unquestioningly, and became more than ever attached to the Denver stranger.

What became of Mr. Vivian during the succeeding day neither of the monte men could ascertain. But he appeared in his place at the Palace on the following evening with commendable promptness.

After a time Maximin casually intimated that there was no room in the building more comfortable than his, or where a simple game of cards could be played with more quiet or ease.

To this an adjournment was thereupon made; and in its seclusion Mr. Vivian became jovial and even more communicative than ever.

Encouraged by this the monte men asked for a liberal loan; and here a new phase of the man's character was introduced. He became icily reticent, displaying all the cool reserve of the western money shark.

"I should greatly like to accommodate you, gentlemen. But the security! I only loan in one way; and the security you offer wouldn't be accepted by any man of business judgment."

"However, I'm willing to make a small loan, simply as a favor, and without any collateral. You may count it a debt of honor, and pay as soon as you are able."

This was altogether so generous that it quite won upon the good graces of the gamblers, and when they had divided the small loan between them, they celebrated the event and toasted the gold shark in liberal glasses of liquor.

The latter was a sly fox, remaining serene and quiet under all circumstances, and never muddling his head with the vile beverages sold in Magic Gulch.

"I haven't a cast-iron stomach, gentlemen, nor one lined with non-corrosive copper; and so I let the stuff alone. It isn't fit for a hog,—not meaning any reflection, you understand, by the statement."

Good feeling having been restored by the loan, and all having become somewhat tired of play, a deal of conversational reminiscences was indulged in, during the course of which the shrewd Mr. Vivian acknowledged that throughout the greater part of his career he had been a sport and gambler himself.

"But I've reformed, gentlemen," smiling blandly at them over his glasses, "and have become an honest lender of money at a hundred and fifty per cent."

"And by the way, that recalls a circumstance! Since coming to this town I have run across a fellow that I used to know as Diamond Dan. You're acquainted with him, perhaps?"

"I should smile!" replied the elegant Hogan, nipping a yawn in two and staring at the stranger with renewed interest. "He's counted one of us."

"Well, you want to look out for that fellow!" and the pilgrim from Denver lifted a fore-finger warningly and impressively. "You may count him one of you if you like, but he isn't. The fellow is a detective, as I have good reason to know."

A look of blank astonishment came to the faces of his hearers. This explained Dan's eavesdropping and prying, and the many queer actions they had not been able to account for. And now the question arose, why had he been shadowing them?

"You are sure of that?" Maximin faltered.

"Why, certainly! And I wonder you didn't find it out long ago; I thought maybe you'd be able to tell me something about him. I suppose you see him every day?"

"About!"

"I have been watching him myself a little; and I'll double the loan I just now made you if you'll explain the strange control he has over this man, Carom."

It was so entirely unexpected, this request, that the monte men fairly gasped their amazement. It was indeed news to them that the sport had been exercising any sort of control over the miner.

"Oh, you must be mistaken about that, you know!" Maximin protested. "We know both parties well. Diamond Dan has been staying at Carom's since he got hurt, and of course they're on friendly terms, but that's all. Why, there can't be anything else!"

The words were spoken with the positiveness of a man who feels that he cannot be mistaken.

"Maybe I am," Vivian reluctantly confessed. "Of course, you ought to be better posted than I can possibly be. But it struck me that Carom must be an ally of his."

The statement that Diamond Dan was a detective evoked much comment. But the rascals never dreamed they were talking to Diamond Dan himself.

It was a late hour when the supposed Mr. Vivian took his departure. He was vexed and disappointed. The whole trend of his talk had been along lines likely to lead the gamblers into an inadvertence that would reveal the secret of their mysterious influence over Paul Carom. And the result had been a flat failure.

"Like the little boy of the reader, I'll have to 'try, try again!' he soliloquized, endeavoring to pluck up fresh courage. "There's a secret there somewhere, and I'm resolved to lay it bare."

CHAPTER XVI.

A STRANGE ASSAULT.

THE following night witnessed a singular occurrence.

Diamond Dan, in the disguise of Jules Vivian, the money-lender, had retreated somewhat early from the garishness, noise and heat of the gaming rooms. He had had another interview with the monte men, but nothing had come of it; and, considerably disgusted and ill at ease he had betaken himself to the half-lighted streets, where

the cool air from the mountains blew gratefully, and the din of the rabble ceased to vex.

On leaving the Palace he was careful to see that he was not observed and followed. This was more from force of habit than anything else. He felt sure his disguise had not been penetrated; and no one except a foot-pad would care to waylay the Denver stranger.

Almost unconsciously he bent his footsteps toward the place which had for so many days been his home. Not the faintest shadow of danger troubled him, and he was, therefore, taken completely by surprise, when, on turning a corner two or three squares from Carom's, he was suddenly and viciously assaulted.

Bewildered by the unexpectedness of the attack he stumbled blindly backward and came near falling headlong. With a snarl like that of an enraged animal, the assailant leaped after him, flourishing a knife. Before the man could strike, the sport regained his feet and closed with him.

In that end of the town the street lamps were few and far between, and passers still fewer, at that time of night. About all the light there was came from a new moon. Hence, Dan could not determine who the man was, though his form was strangely familiar.

While closing with him the sport managed to grasp the knife and quickly wrested it from his hand.

A wonderful transformation was the result. The man ceased to struggle, and stood staring at Dan in a hopelessly bewildered way.

"Thunder!" and the sport stepped backward in amaze as the face came into view and the features were revealed. "Is that you, Carom?"

Yes, it was Paul Carom; and he now looked at Dan as if he did not at all comprehend where he was or what had occurred.

"You don't know me?" Dan questioned, not knowing what to make of this.

Then he recollected his disguise, which his most intimate friend would have found difficulty in penetrating. Adroitly removing the beard and glasses, he turned again to Carom.

"You'll recognize me now, old fellow! No wonder you took me for a stranger. But, what did you mean by jumping onto even a stranger in that way?"

A look of comprehension came into the miner's face.

"What are you parading around in that sort of rig for?" was his unexpected query.

"I'll explain that later," returned Dan. "Just now I want to know what you meant by attacking me with this knife?"

Such an appearance of utter confusion as Carom presented! His face became ashen and blank with fear and despair.

"I didn't do it!" he declared. "Surely I didn't do that! Why, Donnelly, I'm a friend of yours!"

"That's what I always thought!" and Dan was as much mystified as Carom seemed to be. "You don't really mean to tell me that when you jumped onto me like a wild-cat awhile ago, you didn't know it?"

"My God! Then I must be losing my mind!" and the unhappy man bowed his face in his hands as if to shut out the horrible thought.

Diamond Dan regarded him with compassionate anguish. Up to that time he was hardly ready to believe that Carom had not known what he was doing, but thought the miner had mistaken him for some one else. Carom's sincerity, however, admitted of no further questioning; and temporary aberration of the mind was the only possible explanation.

He was about to attempt some rejoinder, when Carom turned abruptly and strode off in the direction of home.

But the anguished miner as quickly changed his intention and came back.

"There's no use trying to conceal the truth from you, nor from myself. I was surely crazy a while ago, if I did what you say I did. But I have no recollection of doing anything of the kind."

He was making a great effort to maintain his usual calm.

"It's a terrible thing to think about or talk about, Mr. Donnelly! Still, if you'll step over here in the shadow with me, where we'll not be observed—"

He stopped as his eye fell on the knife which lay glittering in the moonlight.

Diamond Dan advanced and picked it up.

"Is that the weapon?" and Carom held out his hand for it.

The sport nodded.

"Well, it isn't mine. I don't remember to have seen it before this minute."

A queer look came into the face of the sport.

He recalled having seen the knife, though only once. That had been while in Maximin's room. The latter had opened the drawer of the desk where he kept his liquor, and the knife had thus been brought to Dan's notice. There was a peculiar marking on the handle that enabled him to identify it.

But of this he said nothing to Carom, merely looking the miner in the eyes for the purpose of discovering his mental condition. He also resolved not to say anything about it, preferring to work out his conclusions alone.

"Take it," and he returned the knife to the sport. "I don't know where it came from; and I don't want even to see it or think about it."

"Shall we go into the shadow?" Dan asked, fearing some one might come that way. "Otherwise I'll have to transmogrify myself!"

There was a log where the shadows lay densest, and on this they sat down.

"Now tell me just everything I did," the miner requested.

And in answer Dan gave a detailed account of all that had happened.

"Do you know I've been afraid of something of that kind for weeks!" and there was a painful earnestness in Carom's voice. "Several times lately I've found myself wandering about the town, and for the life of me couldn't tell how I got there. It's a horrible experience. You never walked in your sleep, I suppose?"

Dan stated that he had not.

"I used to when I was a boy. I remember one night that I wandered out into a field, and when I woke up I felt just as I have done recently when discovering myself in some strange quarter of the town."

"It's queer!" said Dan, wishing with all his heart that he could change the course of the conversation.

"Donnelly," and Carom's tones became tremulously impressive, "if—if anything should go wrong with me, you'll see that Jeannie is removed from this place and put with good people, will you? You can sell the house and what things we have, and turn the money over to her. God knows it's little enough, but it's all I have!"

"You mustn't talk that way!" Dan insisted. "Nothing is going to happen to you. You're weak and worn down, and your nerves are all unstrung, and the attacks you have had are nothing more than a return of your old somnambulism."

"I wish I could believe so!" Carom solemnly affirmed. "That wouldn't be so terrible. But some way I can't convince myself that it's mere sleep-walking. Anyway, you'll promise me, Donnelly?"

"I will!" Dan fervently responded. "I'll do everything you ask!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A FURTHER TALK WITH JEANNIE.

HAVING exacted this promise, Carom showed a disposition to return home. The talk had led Dan's thoughts into new channels, and a strong desire to see Jeannie now came over him.

"You go on home, and I'll follow you presently," he said. And when he saw Carom well on his way, he turned back toward the town, having in the mean time replaced the disguising beard and glasses.

Twenty minutes later, in his own personality, he was trudging down the path taken by Carom.

Jeannie had been informed of his coming and met him at the door. She was neatly and becomingly attired, and the slight flush on her cheeks added to her beauty. The sport thought he had never seen her looking half so handsome.

An hour was spent in pleasant conversation—pleasant at least to the young folks, though Carom was moody and abstracted. At the end of that time he excused himself and retired, saying he was half sick and generally out of sorts.

This was the opportunity Dan had sought. Jeannie had dwelt much in his thoughts of late; and his investigations had forced him to the conclusion that she was not the heiress to the Markham estate.

All the way down there he had diligently conned certain sentences with which he proposed to lead up to the subject nearest his heart. He was sure they were appropriate and even brilliant; but now, when alone with the girl, he could not recall a single word or sentence that could be fitted into the small talk which custom sanctions.

"Jeannie!" he began, making a desperate plunge and feeling the earth reeling beneath him. "It's long been on my mind to speak to you of—er—"

He stopped, confusedly, sure he was making himself ridiculous.

The demure maiden who sat opposite must have guessed what he was striving to say, for her cheeks were burning scarlet and her eyes shone like stars, but she would not in the least deign to help him out of the mire. It even seemed to the humiliated lover that she must be taking pleasure in his discomfiture.

"You certainly know what I mean, Jeannie," and he ventured to clasp one of her hands in his.

"I want to confess my love for you, though I find myself as awkward as a booby in making the attempt. But I will speak—and you shall hear! Since the day I first came to this house I have loved you. Your goodness—your kindness! I couldn't help it! Won't you speak to me, Jeannie? Won't you say that you return my affection?"

With quick and panting utterance he had stumbled on, filled with doubts and fears.

"You are sure you comprehend the meaning of all you say?" she questioned, in a voice that was as agitated as his. "You must not forget the difference in our station!"

"The difference is all in your favor!" he declared, with passionate earnestness. "What am I, even, to dare aspire to your hand? So far as the world knows, nothing but a gambler!"

"But you are not a gambler!" she said, softly. "I have felt that for this long time."

"Say that you return my love!" he whispered, drawing her toward him. "I am not a common gambler, thank Heaven! But, no matter what I am, I love you with all my heart, and would make you my wife!"

She did not reply in words; but when he pressed the kiss of love on her upturned lips, she did not try to release herself or draw away.

"Now, tell me just who and what you are?" she requested. "You owe it to me, by the confession you have made. I am foolish for allowing you such privileges when I know so little of your past, or even of your present."

He realized the justice of this, and forthwith laid bare his life history, and the motives which had drawn him to Magic Gulch. Much that he told is of little interest to the general reader, and much has been already related. What struck Jeannie's fancy most appealingly, perhaps, was the portion relating to his search for the daughter of Sydney Markham, the Englishman;—though of this she had previous knowledge. She had never heard, though, that she was believed by Maximin to be the heiress to this fortune, or to one similar.

"And that's what made Maximin call on me? I presume it can't be that you are similarly influenced?"

She slipped from his embrace and looked up at him coquettishly.

"Come, now, you're not treating me fairly," and there was a flavor of reproach in his words. "I've struggled to be extra honest with myself and with you. As long as I thought there was a chance that you might be this Miss Markham, I tried to fight down this passion."

"And are glad that you didn't succeed?" archly. "I am glad, too. 'Twould have been terrible, Mr. Donnelly, wouldn't it?"

Dan was in doubt as to whether she was jesting or in earnest, and was about to begin another coaxing protest.

"I wonder what gave Maximin such a foolish idea?" she continued, seeming to know what was on her lover's mind.

"It's a very natural error," Dan declared. "You forget that I came near making a similar one! I presume there was something in the letter he got which caused him to fix on you. How long since he has been here?"

"There you go," and she shook a forefinger warningly. "You must recollect I haven't made any promises, yet; and therefore you are not justified in quizzing me or in trying to assume control over my actions."

"But you will promise," he smilingly asserted. "You've gone too far to retract."

"Well, then, he was here this forenoon, if you must know! He said he came to see father, though he must have known father was at work at that hour. And he stayed, oh! ever so long."

"And talked most divinely?"

"He certainly did!"

"And you told him—"

"I told him he needn't come any more!"

Surely she never appeared more bewitching than when making this statement, and the sport can not be blamed for again drawing her to him and ravishing her lips of another kiss.

"And what did he say?"

"He wanted to know if I had lost my heart to a certain person popularly known as the Diamond Sport?"

"And you told him—"

"That it was none of his business!"

"Good for you! Now, if you'd only confess to me—just to me—that you really had so lost your heart!"

"Why, I wouldn't be storying!" and the blushes were so hot and burning she would fain have hid her face in her hands if he had permitted it.

"You are a jewel!" he declared, kissing her again and again. "I should be the happiest man on earth, if I only knew that your father would be favorable to our marriage."

A shade passed over her face at this mention.

"Poor, dear father! I have had dreadful fears for him lately! You can't know how he has changed in the past six or eight weeks. He hasn't been strong for years. He is weaker; and yet that is not all. There seems to be some kind of shadow hanging over his life. You remember our talk on the subject some time ago?"

Dan remembered it full well. In fact it was seldom out of his mind long at a time.

"You feared insanity then," he ventured, "and I opposed your belief. The events of to-night almost convince me you were right and I was wrong."

He hastily sketched the events connected with the strange assault of the evening.

"I didn't intend to speak of this," he apologized, "and should not, if you had not led directly to the subject. But it may be as well for you to know all, even the worst. Ignorance is seldom a blessing. It seems to me, from what your father said, that he is subject to temporary aberrations and hallucinations. These may pass away in time. But you should be on your guard, for your own life may be some time endangered as mine was. I don't think it best to speak of the matter to any one, nor even to allow him to know you are aware of his affliction. The best thing, if it can be done, is to keep his mind clear of the subject, and occupied with matters entirely disconnected from it."

The conversation had taken so serious a turn that the girl could not speak because of her emotions. But Dan deftly swung the pendulum backward; and when he took his leave the pulsations of requited love drove away the somber feeling which this other talk had produced.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CAUGHT NAPPING.

THE discovery that the knife found in Carom's possession belonged to the gambler, Maximin, gave Diamond Dan cause for much thought and speculation. It seemed altogether a very puzzling thing, and not to be accounted for on ordinary grounds of reasoning. And then, too, Carom did not know whose knife it was or how he came to have it!

The following evening, the sport, with the knife in his possession, repaired to the Palace gaming-room, resolved to unravel the mystery if possible. He was in the disguise he had recently adopted; and as Vivian, the money-lender, was gladly welcomed by Maximin and Hogan.

After a few turns about the room below, the trio went up-stairs at the bidding of the monte man, who had not yet abandoned the hope of plucking the suave Mr. Vivian in a style to do justice to his gambling profession.

Once in the room, liquor and cards followed as a matter of course. But the gold shark played carelessly and uneasily, being not at all taken with the game, and finally broached the subject nearest his heart.

"Do you know, gentlemen, I had a strange experience last night! I keep thinking of it all the time, and it interferes with my play; and so I'll unburden my mind and be rid of it once for all! I was strolling around enjoying the night air, and never dreaming of danger, when some fellow leaped on me and attacked me with a knife. If I hadn't been rather quick and active for a man of my years he'd have done me up. He came mighty near it as it was."

He stopped and began fumbling in his pockets, and brought out the knife he had taken from Carom.

The story had naturally attracted their curiosity; but a look of fear and surprise came into their faces as they saw the knife.

Dan, who was watching them furtively, was gratified at this. He felt sure they not only recognized the weapon, but that they knew full well how the miner came by it.

"I thought you might be able to identify it," he said, quietly. "You know so many of the men about town. It's a rather peculiar weapon,

as you'll see. I don't recollect having ever run across another just like it!"

He handed it over with a grave air.

Hogan was badly rattled by this time. Maximin was white, but outwardly calm.

"It is a queer-looking thing!" the latter declared, turning it carelessly over in his hands.

"And it seems to me I've seen it before."

He reached into his coat-pocket, as for a handkerchief to wipe away some specks of dust visible on the blade. The next moment the disguised sport was looking into the deadly tube of a cocked revolver. Never was there a more surprised man. He had been caught napping.

"Aha! my clever gent of the diamonds!" Maximin sneered. "You have been playing it mighty fine on us for lo! these many nights! But, the game's up! I see through your disguise!"

Dan was almost palsied with astonishment at this sudden turn of affairs. It was to him inexplicable how the monte man had made the discovery of his identity. Had the gambler known who he was all along, and been only playing with him as the cat does with the mouse before crushing it?

"What do you mean?" he demanded, thinking a bold course the safest, and clinging to his pretended character. "A little explanation wouldn't be out of the way, Mr. Maximin."

"Faugh!" and the latter spat out his disgust. "You can't pull the wool over my eyes any more, Donnelly! I'm willing to acknowledge you're equal to the best in that line; but when my eyes are once open they don't close very easily."

Hogan, who until the monte man had disclosed the fact that the gold shark was none other than Diamond Dan in disguise, had never dreamed of such a thing, was now furious with wrath.

"Shoot the villain!" he howled, dragging out his own revolver and bringing it to bear on the common enemy. "Put a slug into him, and then he'll be out of the way. The scoundrel! The—the—"

There were not words strong enough in the language to do justice to his outraged feelings, though he showered the entrapped sport with withering anathemas.

"Take it cool, pardner mine!" Maximin advised. "Hard words break no bones, you know, and may bring unwelcome visitors from below; though it does seem that this is an occasion for cussing. I'll not shoot him unless he tries to make a break, and then I'll down him, and explain to an inquisitive world that he tried to burgle us. I'll not shoot him—but you may bet your boots he don't leave this place alive!"

Diamond Dan realized that any further attempts at denial would be useless. Having gone so far, they would not permit him to go, no matter what his protestations, without first searching him; and such a search must reveal the truth.

"Suppose I am Donnelly? In the language of one greater than I, 'What are you going to do about it?'" deftly sweeping the beard and glasses aside. "I've been having a little lark at your expense. When I tell the boys about it in the morning, you'll have to set up the drinks all around, or you'll never hear the last of it. They will appreciate the joke, if you don't."

"There are several 'ifs' in the way," Maximin sneered, "the most important and most prominent of which is, if you get the chance. You don't quite take me for a fool, Donnelly! I'm sure of that, whatever else you may think me. I know who you are now; and you can thank this disguise trick of yours for the revelation. You are a detective! The boys will not think too highly of you when I tell them that. They are not in love with detectives, you know!"

"Assertion and proof are two different things!" Dan retorted. "If I deny the charge, I fancy my word will go quite as far as yours."

"Bab! What's the use of beating about the bush? I've thought for some time you were on the detective lay. Now, what were you piping us for?"

The threatening revolver was shifted to emphasize the question.

"I see you are bound to have it your way!" and the sport essayed a smile. "No doubt I've been piping you for fun—if you will have it that I've been piping you. One question is as fair as another; and so I'll answer Yankee fashion: What makes you think I've been shadowing you at all? Have you done anything to justify shadowing? 'The guilty flee,' etc., you know!"

It was evident to the monte man that Dan was fighting for time.

"Reply to what I've asked you!" he com-

manded, a black frown disfiguring his handsome face. "I'm not on the witness-stand at present!"

"Neither am I! I'm a prisoner on trial. The accused can't be forced to incriminate himself, you ought to know that!"

"This Vivian business gives you away, Dan! You can't wriggle out of that!"

"What will you do if I speak the truth? Will you let me go?"

"We'll see about that later. You might just as well confess everything, without requiring any promises. If you don't, we'll find means to make you."

"Talk is cheap, but it takes money to buy land!" the sport declared, with characteristic recklessness. "With one yell I can bring a mob from the gaming-rooms; and what will you do then?"

"Drop you in your tracks before the yell is half uttered!" Maximin coolly asserted. "If you doubt it, just proceed to try it on. I ain't in a mood for monkey business, Donnelly, even if you do seem to think I am."

There could be no mistaking the deadly earnestness of his tone.

"Stop the palaver and do something!" Hogan protested. "I'm in for tying him up, and dropping him out here in the hills somewhere where nothing but a carrion crow will ever be able to find him. That's the only way to work such cattle!"

"If my dear friend Hogan only had his innings just now, I'm afraid my shrift would be short!" and Diamond Dan gave a hard laugh. "But he is crying entirely too soon. I'm willing to make a clean breast of everything. Not through any fears of those bulldogs you are threatening me with, but for reasons of my own."

"Ah!" and Maximin lifted his brows in a fine and supercilious scorn. "You are very kind!"

"I am a detective," Dan went on, not heeding this, "and I have been shadowing you for a purpose. Perhaps you can guess what it is, but for fear you cannot, I'll tell you. I discovered by chance that you are scheming to get possession of a fortune which you think is coming to Miss La Rue!"

The gamblers had surmised something of the kind ever since their suspicions had been first aroused against the sport, but their surprise was nevertheless as great as if the idea had been an entirely new one. They had never expected, with all their bluster, to wring such an admission from him.

Dan, however, was guided in this confession solely by self-interest, and not by fear, as they believed. He thought it possible to learn if all his surmises were true by studying their countenances while they were thrown off their guard.

Hence, he continued:

"And to that end, you have been exercising some hellish influence over the girl's father, and bending him to your own base purposes."

The consternation visible on their faces amply paid him for the dangerous venture. He had hit home and they showed it in every line of their trembling countenances.

"What makes you think that?" Maximin demanded, without taking the trouble to deny the general correctness of the charge.

"A thousand things! Your own actions, and Carom's. I haven't been watching you fellows for nothing, you may understand. You have asked me to confess! A little confession on your part, it seems to me, wouldn't come amiss, now! What have you been doing to the fellow?"

"My dear Donnelly, you are entirely too wise to live long!" and there was an undercurrent of fearful meaning in the sweetly-spoken words. "Precocious youths have a fatality for dying young, and I fear you will not be an exception."

Dan had gained his points. He had proved to his own satisfaction that these men had been exercising some diabolical influence, by threat or otherwise, over the poor miner; and had also succeeded in distracting their attention temporarily from himself.

With a quick movement he arose to his feet and hurled his chair at the scoundrels, who were sitting together at the table near the center of the room. So unexpected was the movement, and so thoroughly were they off their guard, that they had not time to fire their weapons or to escape. Like a bolt from a catapult the chair struck the table, bowling it over and hurling them down with it. And before they could rise the sport had darted past them and gained the corridor.

"Shoot him!" Maximin howled. "He mustn't get away, now."

Dan had halted for an instant, before speeding on, and was listening with amused pleasure to the din his sudden movement had evoked.

"Catching always before hanging!" he shouted back, and then bounded lightly down the corridor toward the rear entrance.

CHAPTER XIX.

A STREET DUEL.

THE gamblers were panic-stricken by this escape of Diamond Dan.

"If he gets away, now, we're done up!" Maximin declared, as he pulled himself together and began to look for his revolver, which had dropped from his hand in the confusion of the downfall. "We mustn't let him get away!"

He grasped the weapon and bounded through the doorway, closely followed by Hogan.

They had been in no condition to note the route the sport had taken, and so, instead of going toward the rear door, they rushed down the stairway toward the gaming-room.

Their sudden entrance into this rather startled the occupants. Shouting and loud talk were of such common occurrence that no heed had been paid to the cries which had come from the monte men's room. But the appearance of the excited men could not fail to draw attention.

A glance served to show that Donnelly was not in that apartment, and concluding that he had hurried into the street, the gamblers rushed in the same direction.

"What's up?" a dozen voices shouted.

Maximin did not reply, and a knot of men swarmed after him, anxious to see for themselves what had aroused the monte man's ire, for it was plain to the most unobservant that he was in a towering rage.

Hogan was close at the heels of his chief, but like his chief he was dumb to all inquiries.

It took but a moment to gain the street.

There was a fair moon, and the street was partially lighted by its gleaming, assisted by the feeble rays of the street lamp.

As Maximin leaped from the doorway into the faint light cast by the lamp, he saw a form hurrying by, and fancied it that of the sport.

Without question or command he threw up his hand, and the revolver spouted its deadly fire into the heart of the night.

The man fired at, wheeled and, seeing the monte man in the act of discharging his weapon, raised one in return and sent an answering bullet almost straight at the doorway.

A big crowd had gathered there; and when the leaden missile tore huge splinters from the very lintel over their heads, they fell back and scattered in dismay.

A number of men had been lounging in the street, and the way in which they crowded themselves into corridors and alleys showed they realized the deadly nature of the average Western street duel, in which a dozen innocent onlookers may be killed or wounded, and the principals escape unscathed.

Hogan was not by nature as courageous as Maximin. Either that, or he was gifted with the discretion which is said to be the better part of valor. When the balls began to sing, and the gunpowder to spurt and flame, he took refuge behind the heavy walls of the Palace with the rest of the non-combatants.

The individual fired at by the monte man advanced, as he returned the shots, seeming not at all loth to come to close quarters with the enraged Maximin. The advantages were against the latter. The lamp light revealed him plainly to his opponent, who was partially shrouded in gloom.

A steady stream of fire seemed to issue from the muzzles of the weapons as the men hurried toward each other, working their revolvers as fast as they could.

Of a sudden the monte man reeled and clutched wildly at the air. But he regained his equilibrium, and with a bitter curse again fired. The weapon of his opponent cracked at the same instant. Both fell; and while the monte man strove to once more revolve the cylinder, the other lay quite still in the place where he had fallen.

The duel was over; and one or both of the combatants seemed fatally injured!

Realizing that all danger to themselves had passed, the men of Fiddler's Palace streamed through the doorway, and with excited cries hurried to the prostrate duelists. They had recognized Maximin from the first, and were eager to see who his enemy might be.

Great was their surprise, therefore, when they stooped above the unknown and looked into the face, not of Diamond Dan, but of Dick Sloan, the gambler!

Sloan was quite dead; one of the heavy balls

from Maximin's revolver having gone through his heart.

The monte man was unconscious, and his injuries appeared to be of a dangerous if not fatal character.

He revived somewhat as the throng stood above him, and asked to be carried to his room.

This was done; and when placed on the bed his first inquiry was for the man he had slain, and his next for Hogan.

A look of surprise crossed his pain-racked face when told he had killed Dick Sloan.

"It can't be!" he asserted, straightening up and gasping out the exclamation. "You are lying to me! Where is Hogan?"

A search was made for the latter; and he was brought into the room under guard, he having been arrested a few moments before by Diamond Dan Donnelly, the detective, assisted by a body of friends whom the latter had called to his aid.

Maximin groaned as he saw this.

"I'm afraid it's up with us, old boy!" turning feebly to Hogan. "I've got it here; and I feel that my time is short!"

He lifted a hand to the ragged wound in his breast, from which the blood was flowing so freely that it could not be stanching.

Hogan whitened perceptibly, but made no reply.

"I thought I was firing at Donnelly there," said the sinking gamester. "I never thought of Sloan!"

"Won't somebody explain this muddle?" queried Fiddler, at which all looked at the sport.

He was about to say something to appease the growing curiosity when a miner known as Tom Wood elbowed his way to the front.

"I think I understand this thing, pard!" glancing over the expectant gathering as one who has a message. "You know me. I work in the mine down there. I writ a letter fer my friend hyer, Marc Maximin, and if he hain't got it, it must be in the room yit. I was down in the mine when Max had the fight wi' the chap what jumped onto him in the gallery; and I run across the feller afterward, and it wa'n't nobody else but Dick Sloan."

"Sloan tol' me, then, that he had it in fer Max, and that sooner er later he'd do him up; an' I low he's been layin' fer him ever sence. Leastways it looks mighty like it, from what's happened."

"T'other night I see Sloan in hyer, a-grumblyin' an' a-talkin' to himself, an' thinkin' it didn't mean any good fer Max, I writ the letter as I said, tellin' all I knowed, but never mentionin' any names."

Dick Sloan, as the reader will remember, was the gambler that had told Diamond Dan of Maximin's past, as related in an early chapter.

Connecting what he had heard then with the story related by the miner, the sport was able to make a pretty close guess at the truth.

Sloan had long held a private grudge against the monte man, the grudge originating in a quarrel over cards, and he had frequently sought an opportunity to slay the man he so bitterly hated.

Thus he had attacked him, by night on the street not far from Carom's residence. Had followed him into the slushy mine in the hope that he might there find an opportunity to kill. And, failing in both these instances, had placed the murderous spring pistol in the desk, trusting it to accomplish what he had been unable to do by direct attack.

When Maximin, blind with rage and excitement, had rushed into the street, it was Sloan he had fired at, mistaking him for Diamond Dan.

Sloan seeing by the glow of the street lamp who his would-be slayer was; had been quick to return the fire. He was a good shot and felt sure he could bring the monte man down; in which case, by the recognized rules of border warfare, he would be excusable, as the monte man had openly commenced the fight.

The excited men clustering in and about the room could not understand all the circumstances so clearly, being ignorant on many points, some of which were known only to Diamond Dan.

So the story related by Wood was accepted as a plausible and even full explanation. And the fact that the sport had been in the room only a short time before, masquerading as the gold shark from Denver, was not unfolded.

"I got the letter," said Maximin, confirming the miner's statement. "I'm obliged to you, Wood!"

Then his wavering glance wandered over the room, dropping here and there, and finally resting on the face of the sport.

"I am going, Donnelly. I'm getting weaker every minute. I feel that I can't stand this long. But I don't want to go without telling

you something first. It's a weight on my mind, and I can't rest till it's off."

There was a pallor on the gambler's face, showing truly that he was not long for this world.

"Do you want to see me alone?" Dan questioned, coming near the bed.

"Yes, please!" was the hollow answer. "Put the others out. I've a message for you. For you!"

CHAPTER XX.

CONCLUSION.

THE room was quickly cleared, and then the sport drew a chair up to the bedside of the dying gambler, and clasped one of the latter's chilled hands in his own warm palm.

"It's about Carom!" Maximin whispered, huskily. "About the spell you charged me with exercising over him. If you'll go to the desk there you'll find a roll of paper. I want you to take it and look it over, at—after I'm gone!"

He nodded feebly toward the desk; and in obedience to the nod Dan arose and after a little search found the roll, and returned with it to the bedside.

"I used to follow mesmerism," Maximin went on. "There were few better than me at the business, and I often went from place to place giving exhibitions. You know something about mesmerism, or animal magnetism, as it's often called?"

"Very little!" the sport was forced to confess.

The monte man was breathing heavily, and it was only by the exercise of strong will power that he was able to talk with anything like coherence. Nevertheless, he continued, beating back the deadening sensations that were stealing over brain and nerves.

"Any book on mesmerism will explain what I can't, now. In my experiments I found out that a deeper influence than the mere trance condition so commonly seen could be exercised on certain people whose nervous state might render them susceptible. Carom was one of these."

"I had befriended him, and on a number of occasions afterwards he let me throw him into the mesmeric trance, just as a pastime, and to amuse me and Hogan."

"He is very nervous and susceptible, and I soon found I could throw him into a deeper sleep than that of mere mesmerism; and that while in that condition I could make suggestions which he would afterwards carry out, without knowing I had suggested anything of the kind, and without remembering I had had anything to do with him."

"I was induced to try this by reading of the experiments which certain medical men and scientists are now making. If you have noticed the papers closely you must also have read of their experiments."

"But I—I can't talk longer—my breath catches—I—I—"

He clutched convulsively at the bed-clothing, and Dan thought him on the point of dissolution. But he rallied, and soon his voice grew strong again.

"I must hasten! I determined to secure the fortune which is coming to Jeannie La Rue, and I thought to do to by exercising my strange power over Paul Carom, her guardian. So I sought and obtained hypnotic control over him; and then made the hypnotic suggestion that he was really her father, that he had kept the fact a secret, though, because of manslaughter committed years before—and that he had no better friend in the world than me. That I had an interest in the mine, and kept him at work when he could not earn wages; and that I was doing it all for love of his daughter. And I impressed on him that he must tell her these things, and use his best efforts to help me in my suit for her hand."

He stopped, for another strangling fit was coming on; which, when it had passed, left him very weak, and almost at death's door.

So strange had been the revelation that Dan sat as if stupefied, without vouchsafing a word.

"I am going, Dan!" he cried again. "Forgive me for what I have done. It will make me feel easier. Above all, forgive me for influencing Carom to attack you with that knife!"

"I forgive you freely!" the sport replied, solemnly, new light breaking in on him at every feebly-uttered word of the gambler.

Again the latter tried to speak, his strength apparently ebbing and flowing; then a pallor settled on his features—and Maximin, the monte man and mesmerist, had passed to his last account.

A study of the paper which Dan had taken

From the desk at the monte man's request went more fully into the subject of hypnotic influence than the dying man had been able to. It seemed that Maximin had made a careful and exhaustive study of the subject, and had collected a great array of reports of cases and experiments. The following, reported from the Paris hospital of Salpetriere, was in line with his statements:

"In the course of the investigations that have for some years been prosecuted at this institution, it has been shown that persons possessing an unusually nervous organization can easily be hypnotized, and that a suggestion or an order impressed on them while in this condition will be subsequently carried out, although they will be entirely ignorant that such an order has been given. A wooden dagger, for example, was placed in the hand of a hypnotized young woman, and she was directed to steal behind one of the persons present and drive the dagger into his heart. Upon awaking from the trance she obeyed the injunction in every particular, and there was no doubt in the minds of the observers that, had the weapon been steel, the blow would have been mortal. Interrogated respecting the motive of her conduct, she averred that she had acted under an uncontrollable impulse, for which she could not account.

"From such facts the inference was obvious that the power of producing hypnotic phenomena might, in the hands of unscrupulous operators, be fraught with grave danger to the community."

Other reported cases showed that certain persons under hypnotic influence appeared to possess dual natures, somewhat after the manner of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde; and that these people, when in a normal condition, had no knowledge whatever of their other personality or character, and of course knew nothing of what they had done or where they had been. And, perhaps stranger than all, that many entrances into the hypnotic state so increased their susceptibility that they frequently fell into that condition without the intervention of an operator. Often these subjects would be met by the operator, at a distance from home, and wearing the assumed character which they had acquired or which had been developed by habitual hypnotic suggestion. And upon coming out of this state would be bewildered at finding themselves in a strange place and without the knowledge of how they came there.

With this statement or treatise, it was not difficult for Diamond Dan to comprehend the dual character which Paul Carom had borne, together with his strange mental manifestations. In all his acts favorable to the gamblers he had been under Maximin's control; even attacking Dan at the latter's suggestion, being able in some strange way to penetrate the sport's disguise. And this last unshrouded a further mystery: that of the sudden discovery by the gamblers of Donnelly's real character under the cloak of the pretended Mr. Vivian. Carom, having been directed to attack the sport and having instead attacked the gold shark, revealed to Maximin's shrewd intelligence that the sport and the gold shark were one and the same.

A few weeks later, Dan Donnelly, the detective, and Jeannie La Rue, were quietly married at the Carom residence.

Hogan had been punished for his many crimes; and Paul Carom had completely freed himself from the baleful influence which had so long shrouded his mind.

The failure to find the heiress to the Markham fortune had rested heavily on Donnelly, and he had fully resolved to curtail the honeymoon and recommence the search in some of the adjacent camps, when he received from his employers the following letter:

"NEW YORK, N. Y., — — —"

"MR. D. DONNELLY:—

"DEAR SIR:—We have received information showing that Elsie Markham, the oldest daughter of the late Sydney Markham—and, up till now, the only daughter of which we had any knowledge—died in infancy; but that there was born to the said Markham, in France, by a second wife, another daughter, who was called Jeannette, after her mother. The mother died soon after Jeannette's birth. We inclose a picture of this second wife, which may materially assist you in your search."

And so the information that Maximin had received from his New York pal was correct. Jeannette La Rue—she had retained her mother's family name—was the very image of that mother, as shown by the picture. The fortune which descended to her was ample; yet, true woman that she was, she cared far less for it than she did for the devotion of the man she loved.

THE END.

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